

## Chapter 13

# The Rainbow Snake

It is, in reality, much easier to discover by analysis the earthly core of the misty creations of religion, than, conversely, it is, to develop from the actual relations of life the corresponding celestialized forms of those relations. The latter method is the only materialistic, and therefore the only scientific one.

Karl Marx, *Capital* (1887)

In Australia as elsewhere, the end of the ice age brought with it a wave of extinctions of the very large game animals on which hunters had probably to an extent depended since the earliest occupation of the continent. The giant marsupials, Flood (1983: 147) points out, would have been relatively slow-moving, vulnerable to human hunters until they had learned to adopt defensive strategies. It may be significant that in the areas where the earliest occupation has been found, such as the Willandra Lakes and Perth region, the megafauna apparently disappeared earliest. Megafauna are absent from both Koonalda and Allen's Caves on the Nullarbor Plain. Since occupation of these caves had begun by at least 20,000 years ago, the megafauna may already have been extinct in this arid region by that time.

Those giant creatures that survived the initial impact of man the hunter, continues Flood (1983: 147), seem to have met their end during the Great Dry at the end of the Pleistocene. Because of their size, all of these animals would have needed to drink copiously at waterholes, and would have died of thirst as the lakes and other water sources dried up (Flood 1983: 155–261, citing Gillespie *et al.* 1978; Horton 1976, 1979; Horton and Wright 1981). Some – such as the red kangaroo – managed to adapt. Others escaped extinction by evolving to smaller sizes. The rest died out completely. The period from about 25,000 to 15,000 years ago was a time of stress: stress from diminishing water supplies, from desiccation and the loss of vegetation, and – perhaps most significantly – from the fires and hunting activities of human predators (Merrilees 1968). Most of the very large animals appear to have become extinct as early as 20,000 years ago. Wooded areas near the

coast probably acted as refuges, which would account for the large animals' apparent survival there longer than in the arid inland regions.

Humans arrived in Australia somewhere between 40,000 and 50,000 years ago, probably at first keeping to coastal regions and river valleys but penetrating long before the end of the ice age into every major ecological zone including the extremely arid centre (Smith 1987). It would be an oversimplification to assert that the earliest modern human intruders into Australia made straight for the very largest game animals and drove them to extinction, although this theory has been vigorously proposed (Martin and Wright 1967; Merrilees 1968). In almost all of the hundreds of archaeological sites known in Australia, the bones of small animals predominate markedly (Flood 1983: 155). As suggested earlier (Chapter 8), it seems probable that the earliest migrants were adapted to shoreline riverine foraging concentrating on fish, aquatic or other plants and small-to-medium-sized game, and that specialized big game hunting within the more arid interior regions did not develop until later. Women with their gathered resources may at first have been relatively autonomous; from earliest times, menstrual synchrony in many regions could have been directly related to the pull of the moon through the tides.

Although neither large collective groups nor a specific focus on hunting megafauna can be documented archaeologically, nevertheless some sites – such as the so-called 'Mammoth Cave' in Western Australia – do show evidence of what seems to be the deliberate breaking, cutting and burning by humans of megafaunal bones over 37,000 years ago (Flood 1983: 154, citing Archer *et al.* 1980). And even if humans in most regions were never primarily reliant on megafauna for their food, human activities may still have altered the ecosystem in unfavourable directions precipitating major social changes as relative scarcity ensued.

Humans' use of fire in grass-burning and in driving game almost certainly had profound consequences. Despite the value of light burning once the vegetation had adapted (Hallam 1975), fires would often have got out of control, raging over vast areas during dry periods. It was this which must have led to the relatively recent supplanting of fire-sensitive shrubs and trees by fire-resistant eucalypts over much of the continent. The early giant marsupials were browsers, needing large quantities of foliage, and it seems likely that many of the trees and plants they ate were drastically reduced by human use of the fire-stick. In addition to the consequences for megafauna, the effects on all game as well as on other resources may have been quite severe.

In any event, for whatever reasons, we know that in many regions desiccation occurred, numerous inland lakes and river systems dried up – and formerly lush rain forests, woodlands and grasslands turned to almost barren deserts. As hunting conditions changed and in many regions became more difficult, humans would have had to adapt.

It would be beyond the scope of the present work to trace the global consequences for menstrual synchrony of the ecological and other changes associated with the ending of the last ice age. Even were we to limit ourselves to Australia, much research would be needed to document the relation between the extinctions and other processes just touched upon and the origins model which has been proposed. However, if the argument for menstrual synchrony in ritual traditions is accepted, we can take it that the Aborigines' myths are in essence correct. Women once manifested synchrony, and then lost it. Whether this loss occurred recently, at some time during the glacial period or even – as is theoretically possible – prior to the earliest Australians' arrival in the continent is not a question that has previously been asked, and so any answers suggested here can only be tentative. But it seems likely that wherever game became scarce, the temptation would have been to chase after prey animals whenever they were encountered – regardless of what women or the moon were doing. Women, moreover, may have been forced to disperse for much of each year in relatively small, loosely organised bands or family units, isolated from one another as they attempted to maximise their foraging success by covering wide areas. And then, as spatial distances meant that synchrony of the old kind was partially or seasonally lost, people would have found it more and more difficult to preserve intact the ancient blood-encoded system of life-preserving cultural rules.

### The Rule of Men

With women's solidarity for economic reasons declining, it may have become increasingly difficult to prevent male power from supplanting it in its cultural functions. Sexism alone would not be an adequate explanation here. Whilst men's mythological allegations concerning primordial female wrongs were no doubt politically motivated, it may have been true that women were unable to maintain sufficient synchrony under conditions of relative scarcity, and that without male intervention to sustain synchrony on another level, all ritual structure would simply have been lost. It would certainly seem that throughout Aboriginal Australia, if ritual traditions have been preserved across the millennia, this is thanks not only to women's own commitment (Bell 1983) but also to the extraordinary resolve of initiated men who knew the immensity of the responsibilities placed upon them. Jealous guardians and custodians of their cultural DNA, these men knew that in accordance with some mysterious primordial design, women's world-creating secrets had been placed in their trust. They did not betray this trust. It is thanks to this fact that anthropology, palaeoanthropology and – through such sciences – knowledge-seeking humanity as a whole can make contact with such traditions today.

Yet on another level there was political deception and manipulation –

however unavoidable this may have been. Women not only lost power, it was actively taken from them. An open male counter-revolution – a blatant violation of women's menstrual space – would have been difficult to impose. Naked licence to violate sacred taboos would have risked the destruction of all order as society became threatened with incest, violent conflict and rape. But if men could progressively subvert and usurp women's power through the use of women's own sexual-political symbols, preserving women's blood sanctity even whilst detaching its creativity from women's own bodies, success might have been achieved. Men could turn the symbolic potency of menstruation into a force opposed to women themselves. They could override women's real, physical menstrual solidarity and yet preserve it on an abstract structural level. In short, the whole complex configuration of blood-encoded cultural symbolism could be transferred intact from women's bodies to men's, leaving it as little altered as possible on the level of form.

It was an early version of what was to become an age-old technique. Subtle subversion, rather than explicit negation, would seem to be how most successful counter-revolutions in human history have been achieved. All is utterly changed – yet ostensibly all stays the same. Even when counter-revolutions involve flagrant violence and – at first – naked illegality, it always makes political sense for the new rulers to clothe their usurpation as quickly as possible with the banners and slogans of the very movement they have just overthrown. It may seem an astonishing story. But looked at in this way, the otherwise baffling ritual and mythological details of Australian Aboriginal ethnography do at least seem to make some kind of sense.

### The Floods

The end of the ice age in Australia was a period of dramatic change. Rising temperatures dried up the lakes of inland Australia; rising seas at the same time drowned vast areas around the coasts. Within a few thousand years, about one seventh of the land mass of Greater Australia had been inundated, and there were times when the seas would have been encroaching on tribal territories and submerging them at a rate of about 100 km per generation, or 5 km a year. It is thought that the sea rose fairly rapidly until about 7,000 years ago, and then more slowly until the present level was reached about 5,000 years ago. The land bridge across the Torres Strait was finally drowned about 6,500 years ago, separating Australia once and for all from New Guinea.

Many Aboriginal myths appear to reflect these events (Campbell 1967). From Gippsland in the east to the Nullarbor Plain in the west, southern coastal Aborigines retain clear memories of a distant past when sea levels were lower and the coast extended further south than at present. To take only some among many impressive examples, the Yarra and Western Port tribes recollected a time when the present Hobson's Bay was a kangaroo hunting ground:

They say 'plenty catch kangaroo and plenty catch possum there' and that 'the river [Yarra] once went out to the Heads, but that the sea broke in and that Hobson's Bay which was once a hunting ground, became what it is'. (Quoted in Campbell 1967: 476)

The Aborigines possessed this information long before Europeans knew anything about the rise in sea levels which accompanied the end of the ice age. Likewise, the separation of Kangaroo Island from South Australia, which is now known to have occurred about 10,000 years ago, is remembered in the legend of Ngurunderi drowning his wives as they fled across on foot (Flood 1983: 180, citing Isaacs 1980: 108).

From Mornington Island on the northern coast come legends of the seagull woman, Garnguur, who pulled her raft backwards and forwards across what was then a peninsula to form the channels that now separate the island from the mainland. Elcho Island was similarly severed from the mainland when the Djankawu brother tripped and accidentally pushed his stick into the sand there, causing the sea to rush in. The narrow seas between Milingimbi in the Crocodile Islands and the mainland were made by the Creation Shark. These and numerous other stories, the archaeologist Josephine Flood (1983: 180) comments, 'are so detailed and specific that there can be no doubt that they recall events thousands of years ago'. Support for the notion that myths can preserve genuine historical memories comes from an extraordinary finding – Aborigines in many coastal regions allegedly possess mythologically encoded *accurate mental maps* of territorial contours which were submerged as the world's sea levels began rising between ten and fifteen thousand years ago (Flood 1983: 179–80).

In addition to the legends about floods, there are many stories about giant mythical beings of the Dreamtime. Some of these quite possibly enshrine memories of the gigantic game animals that roamed Australia in the early days of human occupation of the continent. Flood (1983: 147) cites one especially dramatic story from western New South Wales. It tells of an ancient community's life-and-death battle with a tribe of giant kangaroos.

The first Australians would have migrated along the coastal regions of a continent extraordinarily rich in fish, protein-rich grubs and nutritious plant foods in lush, well-watered riverine and lakeside regions. As they moved inland, they would also have become familiar with an abundance of large animals such as has never since been known. Among these would have been the world's largest ever marsupials – the *Diprotodons*, wombat-like browsers the size of a rhinoceros. Early Aborigines would likewise have met giant wallabies, *Protemnodon*, which were larger in size than the largest living kangaroos. There would also have been genuine kangaroos of huge size, such as *Macropus titan*, *Sthenurus*, and *Procoptodon goliath*, a massive creature 3 m tall

with huge front crushing teeth for feeding on shrubs and trees (Flood 1983: 148). If ice age Aborigines were actively hunting huge creatures such as these – and there is increasingly solid evidence that they were (Flood 1983: 147–59) – then we can imagine a single kill sometimes providing enough meat to feed a sizeable community for days on end.

Such abundance would have had profound social consequences, for as Flood (1983: 250) points out, it would have given the Aborigines ample amounts of leisure time. In fact there is every reason to suppose that under such conditions, collective hunting would have been regularly and predictably successful, as a consequence of which people would have been in a position to adopt something very like the 'slow' rhythm of hunting-versus-rest which was outlined in Chapter 10. Abundant gatherable food and very large game would have made it possible to 'slow down' to a leisurely two-week-on, two-week-off rhythm in which strenuous hunt-related rituals and activities alternated with pleasure-seeking, relaxation, singing, dancing, storytelling, feasting and sexual enjoyment. Abundance, in other words, would have made it realistic in many areas to approximate closely to the 'pure' model of lunar-scheduled production/consumption on the basis of which the human revolution had been consummated in an earlier period. Only later, with increased desiccation, population pressures in certain areas and/or the extinction of many large species of game, would such ideal conditions for synchrony have begun to change.

All this might help explain why Aboriginal legends so frequently depict the world as having been created by the Moon, by a Great Snake or by an All-Mother or other semi-human immense entity who combines lunar/tidal features with snake-like, mother-like and/or rainbow-like ones (Hiatt 1975b; Buchler and Maddock 1978). Among the Lardil Aborigines on Mornington Island, for example, Gidegal the Moon features in myth as 'the main boss' at the first male initiation ceremony; he has a special association with fish, and travels along rivers and across the sea (Trezise 1969: 43–4). In Central Australia, an Aranda myth tells of how Moon was the original custodian of all women. Having tried for himself females of all the different subsections, he decided to renounce them and distribute them in the correct order among men:

To a Kumara man he gave a Bulthara woman, to a Purula a Panunga, to an Apunngarti an Umbitjana, to an Uknaria a Thungalla. The moon man led the lubras out one by one to the proper men, and told them always to marry straight in that way, and not to take wrong lubras. (Spencer and Gillen 1940: 412–13)

In South Australia, the Dieri believed 'that man and all other beings were created by the moon . . .' (Gason 1879: 260). Whilst the moon's involvement in cultural creation is a recurrent theme, the sun is never given such a mythological role. It seems possible that the myths enshrine memories of a

time when kin relations and all social life were indeed, and on quite a mundane level, regulated in accordance with a cyclical logic responsible for the changing phases of the moon, for female menstruation, for human fertility and for all health and hunting success.

### The Rainbow Snake

Almost all over Aboriginal Australia, 'divinity' or 'ritual power' is conceptualised as (among other things) an immense Rainbow which is simultaneously a Snake (Radcliffe-Brown 1926, 1930; Mountford 1978). Europeans frequently refer to this mythological creature as 'the' Rainbow Snake, as if it were a definite personage. But most myths themselves are less clear-cut and consistent in specifying the identity of this being. The Euhalyi Aborigines traditionally ascribed immense power to Bahloo, the Moon, but also thought of this creature as the guardian of a sacred waterhole filled with supernaturally powerful 'Snakes' (Parker 1905: 50). Other Aborigines in coastal regions associated the 'Snake' with the tides (Memmott 1982: 174). The variations are endless, leading us to suppose that what all these myths are referring to is not really a 'thing' at all, but a cyclical logic which lies beyond and behind all the many concrete images – moon, snakes, tidal forces, waterholes, rainbows, mothers and so on – used in partial attempts to describe it. Maddock (1974: 121) suggests 'that what is called the Rainbow Serpent is but a visually striking image of force or vitality, a conception that cannot adequately be given figurative expression'. As evidence, he cites the Dalabon term *bolung*, which signifies not only 'rainbow', 'snake' and 'the mother of us all' but also 'ambiguity in form, creativity, power and time long past' (1974: 122–3). The reality in mind 'cannot be more than partially and misleadingly conveyed in visual and psychological images like rainbow or snake or mother'. In fact, Maddock concludes, no ready-made western concept or expression can hope to convey the notion of what is meant.

In all native accounts, the Rainbow Snake is paradoxical to the core. The great copper python Yurlunggur of the Yolngu 'is both in the heavens . . . and in the subterranean depths' (Warner 1957: 386). 'He is the highest in the sky and the deepest in the well' (Warner 1957: 255n). Although 'he' may be male, he is both 'man and woman' (Warner 1957: 383). The Rainbow Snake Kunmanggur, say the Murinbata, is bisexual: 'Even those who asserted the maleness of Kunmanggur said that he had large breasts, like a woman's' (Stanner 1966: 96). 'It is as though paradox and antinomy were the marrow in the story's bones', comments Stanner (1966: 100) on the basic Kunmanggur myth. Eliade's (1973: 115) cross-cultural surveys of this monster are among the best: he writes that the Rainbow Snake in Australia is able to relate 'to women's mysteries, to sex and blood and after-death existence' because 'his structure has permitted [him] to unite the opposites . . .'

For Maddock (1978a: 1), rainbows, snakes, sisters, and related images are

'a host of fleeting forms in and through which a fundamental conception of the world is expressed'. As a first approach to an understanding of the Dalabon (central Arnhem Land) term for rainbow snake, *bolung*, he suggests that we should 'lay stress on the cyclicity embedded in the concept and . . . draw attention to the role of cyclical thinking in Aboriginal thought generally' (1978b: 115). Other specialists have stressed the centrality of cyclicity in all Aboriginal thought:

The aborigines are not interested, as we are, in the episodes of the past. The important things to them are the cycles of life: the development of the individual from infancy to old age; the path of the initiates from ignorance to knowledge; the yearly round of the seasons; the movements of the celestial bodies; and the breeding time of the creatures. These cycles are full of meaning to the native people, but to them the remote past, the present and the future are and will be changeless. (Mountford 1965: 24)

Or again:

Although no Yolngu person has explained it in precisely this way, it seems to me that Yolngu perceive time as circular, so that from any particular time, what is past may be future, and what is future may be past. (Williams 1986: 30)

Stanner (1956: 60) confirms that Aboriginal 'social time' is 'bent' into cycles or circles, each cycle being in essence 'a principle for dealing with social inter-relatedness'. He adds that this *social* cyclicity is integral to the concept of 'the Dreaming', a concept usually inseparable from 'Rainbow' and/or 'Snake'. Certainly it is the case that Aboriginal paintings and depictions of Snake/Rainbow/Dreaming mythic powers and personages recurrently take the form of circles, concentric circles and curvilinear motifs of all kinds, often in association with women's bodies (figure 22).

So what precisely is this cyclical 'power' or 'Snake' which has been seen as 'a principle for dealing with social inter-relatedness'? It has been argued here that culture was created by menstrual solidarity. If this idea were correct, we might expect hunter-gatherer cultures – or more particularly those mythico-religious aspects of such cultures which represent long, unbroken traditions – to have preserved information telling us of these origins, at least on some level. Such knowledge has not to date been documented ethnographically, anywhere in the world. What we do know is that in Australia, Aboriginal thinkers attribute the origins of their world to the Rainbow Snake.

Let us suppose, for the sake of argument, that such Aboriginal thinkers are in some sense correct. In the light of my thesis, there would only be one way in which they could be correct. The term 'Rainbow/Snake' would have to be Aboriginal Australians' way of referring to menstrual solidarity itself.

It is a risky hypothesis, but fortunately one which we can rigorously test. If it were correct, one would expect *everything which can be said of menstrual*



Figure 22 Upper row: serpentine forms and women. Cave paintings; Oenpelli region, Arnhem Land (Mountford 1956: 167, Fig. 49). Middle and lower: Pilbara rock-engravings. Centre-left: Upper Yule River, male figure with head-appendages, snake and apparently menstruating female (Wright 1968: Fig. 372). Bottom left: Black Hill Pool. Three men with coiled snake (Wright 1968: Fig. 648). Bottom right: Upper Yule River. Menstruating (?) figure and reptile (Wright 1968: Fig. 80; all figures redrawn).

*solidarity to be equally applicable to 'the Snake'*. Menstrual solidarity as specified in the previous chapters on the one hand, and "*the Snake*" as specified by the *Aborigines themselves on the other*, should correspond with one another at every point. The 'Snake' should therefore not be a physical reptile at all but something in zoological terms quite strange. Neither should it correspond in any simple way with the tides or moon, or with the sun's light as refracted through raindrops to form a rainbow. It should be 'like' the tides, and 'like' a rainbow – but it should also be more than these things. In conformity with the model it should be cyclical, alternating continuously between opposite phases or states, blood-linked, linked in particular with *synchronised* menstruation, identifiable with the blood of game animals, responsible for the 'sacredness' of menstruating women and of game animals alike, associated with the moon and therefore in coastal regions with floods and the tides – and conceptualisable as 'like a Mother', although this personage would have to be a collective mother rather than an individual.

Like menstrual solidarity – or indeed like any powerful social movement or force – it should 'carry away' or 'engulf' those falling under its spell. Assuming that menstrual blood were thought of as 'wet' rather than 'dry', this action should be depictable as a snake-mother's or rainbow's drawing of women into a watery world. In terms of detailed mythological imagery, such 'swallowing' episodes should be associated with pools, streams, marshes, rains, storms, wet season, and so on, while the 'regurgitations' should be linked with dryness (fire, dry earth, sun, dry season etc.). 'Dry' swallowings and 'wet' regurgitations would of course disprove the hypothesis completely.

If the hypothesis were correct, we might expect synchronously cycling women to be thought of as 'snake women', with half of their being or their time spent in a 'wet' element or phase, and half in the 'dry'. Meanwhile, so-called snakes would turn out to be human mothers. They should menstruate, give birth to human offspring, copulate with human partners. Where snake copulation is concerned, there should be strict rules which, however, should be the reverse of those applying in normal life. Menstrual withdrawal in the real world is a retreat from exogamous sex into 'one's own blood'. No union with a snake, therefore, should have the characteristics of exogamous marriage. Only intense kin-to-kin intimacies ('incest') should be allowed. 'Correct' or exogamous marriages between women and snakes would disprove the hypothesis.

If snake power coincided with the specifications of the menstrual sex strike, it should have further finely delineated characteristics. It should come on in the darkness of night, and disappear under the bright light of the midday sun or of the full moon. It should be felt to emerge whenever blood began to flow, and should fall away again towards the time when cooking-fires should be lit. Under its spell, it should become impossible for anyone to cook: all meat should resist fire, conjoin with blood or water ('anti-fire') and stay raw. Moreover, the power should punish those who attempt to eat their

own kills or cook their own meat secretly out in the bush. It should correspond, in other words, to what in other parts of the world is known as the Guardian Spirit of the Game Animals, or the Master or Mistress of Game. Were myths to depict cooking as occurring whilst a Rainbow Snake were present, the hypothesis would be disproved.

It should be impossible for humans ritually to embody this power without menstruating. This should make women the 'natural' or 'original' custodians of such power. It should be impossible for men to monopolise or give expression to this power independently of women – unless by some artifice it became possible for men to 'menstruate' synchronously themselves. If men *were* to monopolise snake power at women's expense, despite all the obvious difficulties, they would have to prohibit menstruating women from associating with one another. Then, to enhance hunting luck and general health and well-being in something resembling the traditional ways, these men would have to organise a 'menstrual' sex strike of their own. To be consistent in supplanting women's roles, moreover, men would have to go so far as to 'give birth', sit at a symbolic 'home base' and receive gifts of meat for themselves and for their dependants.

Throughout Australia, ritual power manifests itself in forms which confirm these expectations. 'The Snake' – overwhelmingly the dominant image in most Aboriginal iconography – is identified mythologically as a rainbow-like, blood-red, mother-like, marriage-negating, tribute-demanding cyclical force which has the characteristics which we would expect, down even to some of the smallest details.

In the coastal regions of the Northern Territories and of Western Australia – the regions about which we are best informed – the 'rainbow-snake' is associated with the tides (Memmott 1982), with feminine wetness and with blood. One of its recurrent names is 'Muit'. According to von Brandenstein (1982: 58), this name derives from a Kariera (Western Australian) root meaning 'blood & red & multi-coloured & iridescent'.

In north-east Arnhem Land, during the darkness of night, when Yolngu neophytes are shown the snake for the first time, it is in the form of two immense white 'Muit emblems' consisting of padded poles 'with the rock pythons painted in blood on the white surfaces gleaming in the light of the many fires' (Warner 1957: 304). 'The Snake' in this context appears in the form of two alternating, zigzagging lines of blood. The Wik-Mungkan of Cape York confirm the link with menstruation: the Snake is that force which is 'responsible for women menstruating' (McKnight 1975: 95). Seeing the red band in a rainbow, Wik-Mungkan Aborigines say 'Taipan the-rainbow-snake-has-a-"sore inside" i.e. has her menstrual pains' (McConnel 1936: 2: 103).

### The Myth of the Two Wawilak Sisters

We have already encountered a Yolngu myth telling of how two world-creating females 'sat down, looking at each other, with their feet out and legs apart, and both menstruated', following which each put a 'loop' of the resultant blood around her partner's neck (McCarthy 1960: 426). In this version of the story of the Two Wawilak Sisters, the narrative immediately repeats the climactic episode of blood-encirclement in a different way by saying that the sisters were 'swallowed' by a 'Snake' (McCarthy 1960: 426). A related myth ends by describing how two unnamed sisters 'decided to go into the waterhole and become a rainbow'. Note that they *decided* to do this. It was neither an accident nor a calamity, but a deliberate act. It is explained: 'They wanted to be a snake, like the rainbow, when she is standing up in the waterhole and makes lightning' (Groger-Wurm 1973: 120).

Now, we might ask: Why, in this myth and its countless variants, should two women *want* to 'enter a waterhole'? Why should they *want* to 'become a rainbow', 'make lightning' or get themselves 'swallowed by a snake'? What is really going on in all this?

'Becoming a rainbow' is a reference to the menstrual blood-spell. The rainbow-like 'Snake' – always described in Arnhem Land mythology as water-loving, odour-detecting, woman-encircling and, above all, as blood-loving – is nothing other than the combined symbolic power of women's 'floods' or 'flows'. The fact that the same creature is also identified with tidal movements or monsoonal storms and floods (Memmott 1982; Warner 1957; Lévi-Strauss 1966: 75–108) does nothing to contradict this interpretation – for such 'floods' themselves are in native terms conceptualised as blood-streaked to the extent that they are powerful at all.

We see the blood/flood/snake/rainbow chain of associations endlessly confirmed in all the fine details of Yolngu myth and ceremonial performance. By their ritual dancing around the Snake's sacred waterhole, the mythological Two Sisters are said to have actively conjured up floods and storms *as they combined their blood flows*, the great female 'Rainbow Snake' emerging from its waterhole precisely as *blood streams from the dancing women's wombs*. So accurate is this correspondence that when the blood stops, so does the Snake. When the blood flows out again, so the Snake flows with it. As we read in Berndt's (1951: 22–3) version:

So the *wirrkul* [younger sister, non-bleeding] began to dance, to hinder the Snake's progress. . . . The Julunggul [Rainbow Snake] stopped in her course, and watched the dancing. But the girl grew tired, and called out: 'Come on, sister, your turn now. I want to rest.'

The older sister [*gungman*, bleeding afterbirth blood] came from the hut, leaving her child in its cradle of soft paperbark, and began to dance. But her blood, still intermittently flowing, attracted the Snake further; and she moved towards them.

'Come on, sister', cried the *gungman*. 'It's no good for me; my blood is coming out, and the Snake is smelling it and coming closer. It's better for you to go on dancing.'

So the younger sister continued, and again Julunggul stopped and watched. . . . In this way, the Wauwalak took it in turns to dance; when the younger sister danced, the Snake stopped; but when the older one continued, she came forward again. So the younger girl danced longer than the other, and as she swayed from side to side the intensive activity caused her menstruation to begin; then the Python, smelling more blood, came forward without hesitation.

The Rainbow Snake in northern Australia comes on when genital blood starts to flow, sometimes 'swallowing' whole communities into its domain; it retreats in face of the dry season or fire, releasing its victims at this point from its sway (Mountford 1978: 23). It is explicitly described as the guardian spirit or 'headman' of all the game animals (Berndt 1951: 21). Consistently with this role, when a man tries to cook or eat his own kill secretly in the bush, it may well be the Rainbow which swallows up the flesh-abuser in punishment (Berndt and Berndt 1970: 44). A consistent theme, moreover, is that those identified with the Snake can expect tribute in meat and other resources. Older initiated men who supply younger men with ritual secrets expect such tribute in exchange. And mythology states that before women were robbed of the magic emanating from their vaginas, they, too, could use their menstrual power to extract meat from men. It was only when women were deprived of their 'dilly bags' – symbolic vaginas – that such roles were reversed, women thenceforward having to grind cycad nuts to sustain men in the performance of *their* great ceremonies (Berndt 1952: 232–3; Warner 1957: 339–40).

### The Secret of 'the Snake'

The myths of northern and much of western Australia agree that snake power is 'women's business' in origin. Despite its often ambiguous gender, the Rainbow Snake – as people say in north-east Arnhem Land – was first conjured up when two 'incestuous' Sisters became so intimate with one another that their blood-flows came on together, pouring into a nearby sacred waterhole. In some versions of the tale of the Two Wawilak Sisters (Berndt 1951; Chaseling 1957; Warner 1957), a baby was born at the same time, the afterbirth blood of one sister mingling with the menstrual flow of her partner.

Let us briefly follow this extraordinary story through (see also Berndt and Berndt 1964: 212–13; Berndt, R. M. 1976; Berndt, C. H. 1970: 1306; Kupka 1965: 111–21; Mountford 1956: 278–9; McCarthy 1960: 425–7; for a survey and comparison of the different published versions, see Knight 1987: 235–54). In the following abridgment, Warner's (1957: 250–9)

version (1) provides the basic story-line, with additional information taken from (2) Berndt 1951; (3) Robinson 1966: 37–43; and (4) Chaseling 1957: 139–46:

*The story of the Two Wawilak Sisters*

At the beginning of time, two sisters were travelling across the landscape, conferring names on the features of a previously unnamed world. One carried a child, the other was pregnant. They had both committed incest in their own country, the country of the Wawilak. Carrying spears and other symbols of masculine power, they carried food and hunted game animals, prophesying that everything they collected would soon become *marreim* (sacred/taboo).

At last, having traversed many countries, they arrived at a waterhole in which, unknown to them, dwelt the great Rock Python or Rainbow Serpent, male in some versions (1, 3, 4), female in others (2). This Serpent was a kinsperson to the Sisters. As the pregnant sister felt she was about to give birth, the other sister began to help her. They camped by the waterhole and lit a fire on which to cook their gathered food and game.

As the sister, helped by her companion, began to give birth, afterbirth blood began flowing into the sacred pool, polluting it and arousing the Snake. A rain cloud, lightning flashes and a rainbow (version 3) appeared in the sky: the Serpent was emerging in anger from its hole, unleashing the season of rain, floods and storms. The night was dark except for the thin curve of the moon (3). As the women's genital blood flowed, all cooking-fire became suddenly ineffective. The animals and plants which the women had hunted/gathered refused to cook, jumped up alive from the fire on which they had been placed – and dived 'like men' into the nearby blood-streaked waterhole. The well-waters began to rise.

'Go away! Go away!', the sisters cried, as they became aware of the immense Snake in the sky. Seized with fear, they danced to make the snake go away. But the dancing only brought on the second sister's menstrual flow, attracting the Serpent still more. The waterhole began overflowing, flooding the dry land all around.

Now, filled with foreboding and despair, the sisters fled into the little parturition hut/menstrual hut they had built. But at this point, inside the hut, they were both shedding blood, and as they sang out the words 'Yurlunggur and menstrual blood' – the most taboo and potent of the songs known to them – the angry Serpent thrust its nose into the hut and swallowed the women and their children alive.

Black clouds now blotted out the sky, and rain crashed down in a terrible storm. As the waters enveloped the women and their babies, they bled still more (1) and began undergoing a change of name (2), moving into another realm beyond death. At this point, the Two Sisters had turned into or become the Snake. In a voice of thunder, the great Snake

roared. This 'was the spirits of the two sisters who were speaking out of his mouth. "We are here now", the sisters said. "The snake has eaten us. We are the Marraian, the sacred knowledge of Wittee [the Snake]. Our spirits talk through him for another country"' (3). As the Snake became erect 'like a tree', its head stretching high into the clouds, the Sisters in this way continued to give names to the world. Snakes from neighbouring countries joined in the roaring and name-giving, and all together inaugurated the great rituals which today bind in solidarity tribes from far and wide despite their linguistic differences.

The sisters' symbolic 'death' or Snake-identity, however, was only a temporary phase in a larger cycle. Soon the upward movement had passed its peak. The sisters' incestuous intimacy was now publicly exposed, attacked and disowned. At this point, the floods subsided, the land dried out, the 'Snake' came crashing to the ground, splitting it open – and out from its coiling skin came two women with their babies, now once again in possession of their separate identities, 'regurgitated' on to an ants' nest to be bitten by meat-ants and thereby 'resurrected'. After a brief spell of life, the victims were swallowed again and then finally regurgitated to turn to stone – the form in which they can still be seen to this day.

It will be appreciated that the logic of this myth conforms neatly with the cyclical structure of alternation between two 'worlds' at which we arrived at the end of Chapter 11.

### North-east Arnhem Land: a Humanised Landscape

Aborigines in north-east Arnhem Land model many of their most important rituals on the events described in this myth. Whether the rituals are categorised by Europeans as 'mortuary rituals', 'increase rites' or 'initiation rites' makes little difference – essentially, the logic of the ceremonies is the same. The basic idea is always some variation on the theme of rebirth, whether of the dead, of game animals, of young men undergoing initiation – or of nature and the cosmos as a whole.

Religious life in this region 'centred on procreation, on the renewal of human beings and of the natural species, and on the continuity of family and community life through mythic intervention and guidance' (Berndt 1976: 4). The menstrual ritual of the synchronising Wawilak Sisters is believed to have given rise to all cyclicity, all alternation, all movement between opposite phases and states. Even when men put this in typically negative terms, their awe in the face of mythic Womankind's alleged accomplishments shines through: 'The cycle of the seasons with the growth and decay of vegetation, copulation, birth and death of animals as well as man, is all the fault of those two Wawilak Sisters' (Warner 1957: 385). Had the Sisters not menstruated into the Snake's pool, there would have been no birth and no

death, no male and no female, no wet season and no dry. 'After they had done this wrong', however, 'they made it the law for everyone'.

Menstruation is 'wrong'. It is 'negative', like the rainy season, or like death itself. But – like death – it is part of the necessary scheme of things. As Warner (1957: 404) puts it, the 'swallowing' of the earth by the rainy season 'is known to be caused by the wrong actions of the two Wawilak women' in 'profaning' the Snake's sacred waterhole with their blood. This is not considered an unmixed calamity, because the rain and water bring the plants and bulbs and flowers which are consumed directly by man or provide pasturage for kangaroo, opossum, and other animals eaten by man. In other words, the Yolngu see the Snake's swallowing the women and animals – that is, the flood's engulfing of the world – as necessary and part of the scheme of things, 'and their testimony clearly demonstrates the causal relation between the actions of the Wawilak women and the seasonal cycle' (Warner 1957: 404).

The wet season, then, is 'death'; the dry season, 'life'. But death is the precondition of life in the scheme of things which the Two Sisters established. Menstruation implies seclusion. Just as the floods of the rainy season make travel difficult or impossible, marooning small bands of Aborigines in isolated close-knit groups (Warner 1957: 378–404), so women's own 'floods' mean relative immobility, food taboos, hunger and intense kinship dependency with little social exchange. Women are as if 'swallowed up' in their own blood. But this withdrawal into the self is a necessary retreat, for it is an accumulation of inner strength, like sleep. The skies darken, the eyes close, the withdrawal into the 'Dreamtime' begins. The rains fall – triggered, in ritual conceptions, by women's own blood (Berndt 1976: 68) – and dark clouds blot out sex, feasting and adventure as they blot out the sun. Seasonal cyclicality, in other words, is conceptualised entirely in menstrual terms, being thought, as Warner (1957: 397) puts it, to 'lie within' the menstrual cycle as 'a part of the process of reproduction'.

In the love songs of Goulbourn Island, men are depicted as having incestuous, intra-clan or intra-moiety intercourse to help women bring on and synchronise their menstrual flows – blood-flows which are thought to be essential in triggering the onset of the annual rains. 'North-eastern Arnhem Landers', as Berndt (1976: 68) writes,

saw this as an observable progression of inevitable events: coitus among the palms; the onset of the menstrual flow; the attraction of the clouds; the arrival of the Lightning Snake, drawn by the smell of the blood; and finally the coming of the monsoonal season.

Note here that the Snake is not 'angered' by menstrual blood – on the contrary, it is 'drawn' by its 'smell'. In such coastal songs, the connection between menstrual blood and monsoonal rain is conceptualised through images in which the blood pours down from women's vaginas into each

major 'Vagina Place' of the land itself – the life-giving waterholes, streams and inlets on which fertility depends – and flows thence into the sea, and into the clouds that rise from the sea, returning later transformed, in the shape of the dark monsoonal storms and floods which 'swallow' the earth (Berndt 1976: 100–1).

In this scheme of things, human and natural cycles of renewal are mutually supportive and sustainable through the same rites. The skies and the landscape are felt to beat to human rhythms. Everything natural, in other words, is conceptualised in human terms, just as everything human is thought to be governed by natural rhythms. 'Physiographic features of the countryside', as Berndt (1976: 7) puts it, were traditionally 'likened to male and female genitals', so that imprints in rock told of a mythic act of coitus, a sacred waterhole was a vagina, a shining white substance on a rock surface seemed like semen. Berndt (1976: 12) phrases this in his own way by commenting that the Aboriginal intellectual 'projected his own belief system on to the environment in which he lived. He saw within it the same forces operating as he identified within his own process of living'. But 'projection' is, perhaps, an inadequate term. If synchrony of the kind this book has described was at one time central to Aboriginal life, it would seem that rhythmic nature was projecting her logic into a listening human culture as much as the other way around.

There seems no reason to discount the Aborigines' own belief that in their rituals they were drawing upon natural rhythms and harmonising with them to the advantage of their relationship with the world around them. It was not that man was dominating nature; but neither was it that human society stood helpless in the face of nature's powers. Rather, human society was flexible enough and sensitive enough to attune itself finely to the rhythms of surrounding life, avoiding helplessness by replicating internally nature's own 'dance'. Nature was thereby humanised, while humanity yielded to this nature. If the hills felt like women's breasts, if rocks felt like testicles, if the sunlight seemed like sexual fire and the rains felt like menstrual floods, then this was not mere 'projection' of a belief system on to the external world. This was how things felt – because, given synchrony and therefore a shared life-pulse, this was at a deep level how they were.

Rebirth, in any event, is or was achieved in northern Australia by organising symbolic death so that it took the form of self-dissolution into the corporate identity of 'the Snake' – a self-renunciation explicitly likened to an 'incestuous' return to 'the womb'. This was followed in due course by ritually induced self-recovery or 'resurrection'. For all this to work properly, it was necessary to ensure only that the voluntarily accepted 'death' was menstrual, on the model of women's temporary 'death' each month.

A similar logic seems to have prevailed over much of Australia. Far from Arnhem Land, when the Berndts (1945: 309–10) observed an initiation ritual in the Ooldea region, South Australia, ten men opened the blood-letting phase when they stood up, built a fire, broke off some sharp acacia

thorns and pulled at their penises to enlarge them:

Then holding a thorn in the heat of the fire for a few seconds, each pierced his penis incisure; the sound of the thorns puncturing the skin could be clearly heard. The incisure when pierced several times bled freely, the flow being accelerated by pressure of the hand. The blood was sprinkled on the thighs of the men, either by holding the penis at each side and letting it drip, or by moving so that the bleeding penis flopped from side to side, or upwards and downwards, the blood touching the lower buttocks and loins.

'The actual initiation', write the Berndts (1945: 308n), 'was held during the period of the new moon'.

### 'Inside' and 'Outside' Meanings

In addition to its other features, the story of the Two Wawilak Sisters is a myth of 'primitive matriarchy'. That is, it explains how women once monopolised ritual power, but then lost it. In fact, like all matriarchy myths, it is on one level little more than a male attempt to justify politically the far from self explanatory fact that menstrual power is nowadays exercised by men.

In Warner's (1957) version, the narrative ends by describing – almost as an afterthought, it seems – how two ancestral men appeared at the Rainbow Snake's sacred waterhole some time after the events described in the main body of the story. They found some of the Two Sisters' blood, carefully collected it in containers and went to sleep. Warner's (1957: 259) version ends:

The sun went down. They left the blood till morning. They slept, and while they were in a deep sleep they dreamed of what the two women sang and danced when they were trying to keep Yurlunggur from swallowing them. The Wawilak women came back as spirits and taught the two men. . . .

The two sisters said to men 'This is all now. We are giving you this dream so you can remember these important things. You must never forget these things we have told you tonight. You must remember every time each year these songs and dances. You must paint with blood and feathers for Marndiella, Gunabibi and Djungguan. You must dance all the things we saw and named on our journey, and which ran away into the well.'

All the songs, dances and blood-shedding operations through which the women had conjured up the Snake were carefully described, so that the men could bleed and thus get themselves ritually 'swallowed' in the same way.

The men succeeded in memorising the details. Having woken up, they cut themselves, bled, synchronised their flows with one another, got themselves swallowed, 'died' only to 'come alive' again – and resolved never to forget the secrets they had learned. 'We dance these things now, because our Wongar ancestors learned them from the two Wawilak sisters.' Such rituals – Yolngu Aborigines insist – have been faithfully preserved by men to this very day.

I have stated that 'the Snake' in the Wawilak myth is in fact the symbolically constructed menstrual synchrony of the heroines. But there is an apparent difficulty for this interpretation. It is that 'the Snake' – far from representing women's own menstrual solidarity and power – is in the most familiar versions depicted as just the opposite. The monster is said to have been outraged by menstrual pollution, and to have punished the Sisters responsible for it.

It must be conceded that outsiders and the uninitiated throughout north-east Arnhem Land are encouraged to view being 'swallowed by the Snake' as a calamity – a punishment suffered by the Two Sisters for their 'wrong' in having 'polluted' the Snake's sacred waterhole. Certainly, it always suited the structures of Aboriginal male dominance to depict the 'Snake' as the Two Sisters' – and hence all women's – mortal antagonist. In this context, to be 'swallowed' by the Rainbow Snake is simply to be killed.

In conformity with such 'outside' interpretations of the basic myths, reproductively potent women in much of Arnhem Land – as the following passage on the Gunwinggu shows – are warned to keep away from one another and from waterholes precisely lest they become 'swallowed' by 'the Snake':

When a woman is pregnant . . . she should keep well away from pools and streams, for fear of the Rainbow – other women should get water for her. Babies are especially vulnerable to attack from the Rainbow. In rainy weather, or if she goes near water, a mother should paint herself and her baby with yellow ochre or termite mound. And a menstruating woman should not touch or even go close to a pregnant woman or a baby, or walk about in the camps, or go near a waterhole that other people are using. Traditionally, she should stay in seclusion, with a fire burning constantly to keep the Rainbow away. (Berndt Land Berndt 1970: 180)

But although all this may at first sight seem to present a problem, in fact it is exactly what we would expect. What we are witnessing is not a primal scene or pristine construct free of the ravages of time. The Rainbow Snake as it actually exists is a secondary, derivative construct. Its functions are political, and bent to the service of contemporary forms of power. By means of this

construct, women are prevented from experiencing their reproductive powers as sources of collectivity or strength. Just as women produce male babies who are eventually turned (through initiation ritualism) into their oppressors (Bern 1979), menstruating women are in effect alienated from the power of their own blood. As they recoil from the menace of 'the Rainbow' or 'Snake', they are oppressed by and made to fear the consequences of what is in reality their own extraordinary potential for synchrony and ritual strength.

Alain Testart (1978: 113) describes the relationship between the Rainbow Serpent and menstrual blood in Australian Aboriginal mythology as 'an association of opposites linked by their very contradiction'. But in this case as in others, a dialectic of paradox is in operation, clarifying that the seeming polar 'opposites' – the menstrual flow on the one hand, Serpent on the other – are at a deeper level one and the same. 'They sang blood because that is what brought the snake when Yurlunggur came', an informant explained to Warner (1957: 270), referring to the Wawilak Sisters whose dancing and menstrual bleeding generated the Serpent at the beginning of time. But were not the Sisters, in 'singing menstrual blood', attempting to *stop* the Serpent from swallowing them up? What is really being suggested here?

The truth is that two opposite messages are being transmitted at once. One is that the 'dancing' and simultaneous 'bleeding' of the Sisters were futile activities in that they had the opposite effect to the one which was desired. *Despite* 'singing menstrual blood' and *despite* dancing frantically (in a way which induced the menstrual flow: Berndt 1951: 22–3), the Sisters found themselves being swallowed by the Snake. Everything the Sisters did – singing menstrual blood, dancing menstrual blood – was precisely and with unerring accuracy *the wrong* thing to do if they wished (as the myth says they wished) to avoid becoming engulfed.

But this leads us to the opposite implication of the myth – that the Serpent was conjured up not *despite* the Sisters' dancing and singing, but *because* of them. We have seen already that 'the Serpent' flows from its deep hole in precise proportion as the Sisters' blood flows from the vagina, even to the point of stopping and starting in time with the flow (Berndt 1951: 22–3). It was when the two sisters were *bleeding together* that two things simultaneously happened: (1) they entered their little menstrual/parturition hut together; (2) they were swallowed by 'the Snake'. The implication is that it was the generalised 'wetness' and combination of their blood-flows – the connection of womb-with-waterhole or womb-with-womb – which constituted the force carrying off the Sisters to 'the other world'. This would be consistent with Hiatt's (1975b: 156) suggestion that, in Aboriginal 'swallowing and regurgitation' myths generally, the ingesting and regurgitating organ is really an immense vagina or womb.

It might be objected: "But if 'the Snake' is really nothing other than the combined 'flood' or 'flow' of the women, why is this message so effectively concealed? Why is 'the Snake' depicted as a force alien to the women.

themselves?' At the story's reproductive and dramatic climax, the Sisters become 'as one'. They enter a birth hut/menstrual hut together, both connected by a shared flow of blood. If this is really a shared 'return to the womb', conceptualised as a journey to the sky, why depict it as the trauma of being 'swallowed' by an alien, monstrous 'Snake'?

In penetrating beneath the surface of sexual-political constructs of this kind, the first thing to appreciate is the total contradiction between what men say to women or outsiders, *and what they say in secret among themselves*. It is clear that to those with 'inside' knowledge, the 'outside' interpretations of the basic myths are superficial in the extreme. Not only are these readings known to be mistaken. They are well understood to be *precise mirror-image inversions* of what initiates eventually come to understand.

In the case of the Wawilak myth, the nub of the story is the episode in which the Two Sisters supposedly 'pollute' a waterhole said to be 'sacred'. This is a conventional enough idea: women in real life are often told not to approach sacred waterholes on account of their polluting blood. This blood, it is said, 'angers' the Snake which dwells within the waters. Yet initiated men know a paradoxical secret – namely that if the waterhole of Yurlunggur the Great Snake is sacred at all, it is actually *because* of its having been 'polluted' in this way. 'From its association with that blood. . . .', as Berndt (1976: 70) notes, 'the water itself becomes sacred'. Moreover, the Snake is not simply hostile to women's blood. It is aroused by this blood and in fact needs it in order to be summonsed up from the depths. 'There is the suggestion', comments Berndt (1951: 22n), 'that the snake found the blood attractive'.

Again, the 'Snake' in the Wawilak myth is supposed to have 'punished' the Sisters by 'swallowing' them. But initiated men know that for the two Sisters to have been 'inside the Serpent' would have been no calamitous encounter with an alien being. The Snake would have been the women's kin. To be engulfed by its power would have been to feel an immense sense of *kinship solidarity and strength*. In fact, the myth makes no sense unless this point is acknowledged, for why else would the Sisters have wanted to pass on to future generations their precious knowledge? If all that happened to them was a disaster, why would passing on the secrets have seemed so vital? Why should men in subsequent generations have *wanted* to learn from the Two Sisters how to preserve, symbolically, that supposedly polluting blood?

But it is in the ritual domain that the deeper meanings emerge most incontrovertibly – which explains, of course, why the innermost secrets of such rituals had always to be kept carefully from women. To those with 'inside' knowledge (revealed only gradually through the various stages of initiation), to be 'swallowed by the Serpent' is no disaster at all. On the contrary, to be so engulfed is to feel an immense sense of collective solidarity and power. Throughout Aboriginal Australia, there is no way to generate this serpent power other than by bleeding. We are here discussing what in

Arnhem Land Donald Thomson (1949: 41) called 'the solidarity (the *marr*) of a group, members of which are bound together by the sharing of a special bond'. The highest expressions of this collective 'reproductive power' – which may in adjacent regions be termed *ungud*, *wondjina*, *bolung* and so on (Maddock 1978a, 1978b) – is found in the physical intimacies of ritual life, when men share even the warmth of one another's life-blood itself, smearing blood over one another from penis or arm. In the course of male initiation rituals (designed to sustain the reproductivity of both human and natural realms), men shed large amounts of blood, dipping their hands in each other's streams, fondling each other's bodies and becoming generally immersed in the flow of both affection and blood. In north-east Arnhem Land, men use the Wawilak myth *both* to discourage women from doing any such thing *and* to justify the fact that men alone are today permitted to immerse themselves in one another's 'menstrual' flows.

### The Djungguan

Let us return to Warner (1957: 274–8) as he describes 'the principal interclan circumcision' ceremony of the Yolngu. This is the *Djungguan* ritual re-enactment of the Wawilak Sisters myth.

On the day before the circumcision, a blood-letting ceremony takes place in the old men's camp. The blood is to be used as an adhesive to hold the birds' down and native cotton to the dancers' bodies. Before a man offers his blood for the first time Yurlunggur – a trumpet symbolic of the Snake – is blown over his body. Then the old men sing over him. Meanwhile, his arms are tied near the wrist and shoulder with stout cord. A stone spear head is broken and a flake of it used to make a half-inch cut in the lower arm. The leader rubs the man's head with his hand while another cuts his arm. The totemic emblem is blown against the wound:

The blood runs slowly, and the rhythm of the song is conducted with equal slowness. In a second or two the blood spurts and runs in a rapid stream. The beat of the song sung by the old men increases to follow the rhythm of the blood. The blood runs into a paper-bark basin. . . . (Warner 1957: 276)

The next man opens a hole from yesterday's giving and the blood pours forth in a stream. It runs quickly, and the rhythm of the song is at a fast tempo. 'There is much smiling among the men and an occasional "*main-muk, main-muk* (good, good)'. ' A third man pulls off an old scab from his arm and the blood pours forth in a larger stream than that of the others. The trumpet continues to blow. Several men proudly exhibit their arms, which show five and six cuts that have been made during previous ceremonies. An informant explains the meaning of the blood:

The meaning is like this: suppose you and I have come a long way and we reach a good camp and our people have one house empty and it is a good place for us and they take us in and put us in it. We get in that house and have a good sleep and no one can hurt us because we have friends. That blood is just like that. It makes us feel easy and comfortable and it makes us strong. It makes us good. (Warner 1957: 277)

In being enveloped with a coating of blood, the men are being 'swallowed' by 'the Snake'. *The snake is always defined as kin*. And *this* – this sensation of 'belonging', of being 'at home', of being with kin – is what it feels like to be 'swallowed'. Whatever the myths told to frighten uninitiated outsiders, the men are quite adamant that being 'inside the Serpent' is what sacredness and strength are all about. Whereas the mythological Sisters are alleged to have been afraid of the impending disaster of being swallowed by the great Serpent, the real secret is that the men actively court this 'disaster', which they bring upon themselves by 'menstruating' precisely as the Sisters had done:

*Native Interpretation.* – The blood that runs from an incision and with which the dancers paint themselves and their emblems is something more than a man's blood – it is the menses of the old Wawilak women. (Warner 1957: 278)

Hence Warner (1957: 278) was told during a ceremony:

'That blood we put all over those men is all the same as the blood that came from that old woman's vagina. It isn't the blood of those men any more because it has been sung over and made strong. The hole in the man's arm isn't that hole any more. It is all the same as the vagina of that old woman that had blood coming out of it. This is the blood that snake smelled when he was in the Mirrimina well. This is true for Djungguan and Gunabibi.' – 'When a man has got blood on him [is ceremonially decorated with it], he is all the same as those two old women when they had blood. All the animals ran away and they couldn't cook them.'

When the trumpet blows over the man giving his blood, it is the Snake risen out of his well to swallow the women and their two children 'because he has smelled the menstrual blood of the older sister'. Several well-informed men told Warner: 'When Yurlunggur blows over them when they cut their arms it is like that snake comes up and smells that woman's blood when he is getting ready to swallow them.'

All this, Warner (1957: 278) comments, 'means that the man who is giving his blood for the first time is being swallowed by the snake and is at the moment the old woman'. It follows that although ostensibly the Wawilak Sisters met disaster in being 'swallowed' by the 'Snake', the 'inside' meaning of all this is just the opposite. Men eagerly repeat the 'wrong' of the Sisters' intimacy and menstruation in order to be 'swallowed' themselves.

Dancing, singing, holding and fondling one another, they let flow their own blood in a rhythm which – to the accompaniment of singing to the same beat – conjures up 'the Serpent' and engulfs them all in feelings of profound security, warmth, solidarity and strength.

### Myth, Social Conflict and Contradiction

The various seemingly conflicting and irreconcilable messages of the Wawilak myth, then, revolve around the ambiguity inherent in the identity of the Serpent itself. One reading is that this Snake is 'that which controls women' in the sense not of menstrual cyclicity but of male dominance over the female sex. It is therefore a phallic symbol within a context of male rule and possible rape. The Two Sisters pollute a male sacred site and are sexually punished as a result. This is certainly the story which the women are supposed to swallow, and it is also the message which most social anthropologists appear to have accepted more or less at face value. The great Snake, as Warner (1957: 387) puts it, 'is a ritualization of the male section of society, and the Wawilak sisters who by their uncleanness have provoked the snake (men) into swallowing them are the unritualized or profane sections of the tribe, i.e., the women and uninitiated boys'. Lévi-Strauss (1966: 91–4) accepts this reading in its entirety, and it is generally the case that the Rainbow Serpent in Aboriginal Australia as such has been interpreted as a 'penis-symbol' (for a survey of interpretations see Maddock, 1978a). The Serpent in our myth – which advances upon the Sisters even as they cry 'Go away!' – appears therefore as an immense phallus which rises up into the air and falls, rises and falls, punishing the women for their crime in a cosmic act of rape. Even Berndt (1951: 21), in whose version the Serpent is definitely female, insists: 'The fact that a female snake eventually swallowed the Two Sisters does not affect its role as a Penis symbol.' But the words of Berndt's Aboriginal informants themselves are perhaps more interesting, for according to them the Sisters, in being swallowed by the Serpent, are 'like a penis being swallowed by a vagina, *only we put it the other way around*' (Berndt 1951: 39, my emphasis). The monster is, then, an immense vagina – yet this knowledge is tampered with. The all-swallowing organ, however improbably, is said to be a penis. Things are exactly inverted for the benefit of those on the 'outside' of the circle in which the essential secrets are known.

We know that the Serpent rose out of its well and reached up straight into the sky having 'swallowed' the Sisters. But is the experience of being swallowed 'like' that of being drawn back into the womb – transported to the world beyond – or 'like' that of being raped? Was the Snake at that point 'big' because it was a womb filled with human flesh waiting to be born – as Berndt (1951: 25) suggests when he writes: 'the female Julunggul is big (as if she were pregnant) from having swallowed the Wauwalak'? Or was its immense size that of a penis in an erect state? Berndt insists that despite the

Snake's femaleness, she 'symbolises a penis'; 'her entry into the hut "is like a penis going into a vagina". The whole process of swallowing is interpreted by natives as an act of coitus' (1951: 25). Yet it seems pointless to try to settle on just one of the two diametrically opposed possible interpretations of all this when clearly the ambiguities and conflict between meanings was essential to what the Aboriginal elders were attempting to achieve.

It seems that the essential function of the myth is precisely to convey opposite messages to 'opposite' sections – uninitiated and initiated – of society itself, so that the contradictions in the myth express faithfully the essential contradictions buried in the social structure. Everything in the myth is 'turned the other way around', inverted with respect to its inside or secret meaning, because deception of the uninitiated is essential to the maintenance of male ritual rule. Maddock (1974: 146–52) uses the term 'rites of exclusion' to describe such myths with their associated rituals. It is not simply that women are not needed in the ceremonies, but that their spiritual exclusion should be accentuated by their being brought into the closest possible contact with secrets of whose significance they must be kept unaware. In many Arnhem Land secret/sacred ceremonies, women actually see the forbidden sacred objects, but fail to realise that they are seeing them, since the messages they have been given by men are wholly incorrect. Maddock (1974: 151) comments that if the 'original psychology' of such rites were to be reconstructed, 'it might be found to consist in a deep feeling that it is unsatisfying merely to keep women ignorant, that it is preferable to flaunt in women's faces the things of which they are kept ignorant'. My suspicion is that the old Aboriginals rather enjoyed deceiving anthropologists in the same way.

In the myth of the Two Wawilak Sisters – whose story-line is familiar to both sexes – women are having flaunted in their faces information of vital importance to them. They are able to hear a narrative telling of their own immense culture-creating power. Yet all the time, they are kept as far as possible unaware of the *significance* of what they both see and hear. As the primordial potency of menstrual synchrony is both shown to women and yet made terrifying in their eyes, men set about alienating the value of Womankind's blood-making and child-bearing capacities – even to the point of claiming that the production of babies is in some sense valueless when performed by women, yet of immense culture-creating value when symbolically acted out by 'child-bearing' men.

In the Wawilak myth, it is incest (a 'return to the womb') associated with the ultimate symbol of kinship connectedness – 'blood' – which generates the 'wet' season of rain and storms. The two great wrongs – incest and blood-spilling – are merely different aspects of one and the same sin of excessively stressing blood connection, and it is this which brings on the rains. Lévi-

Strauss (1973: 379–81) shows how, in myths from America to Japan, such 'excessive longing for conjunction with the family' has the same effect, bringing on rain and the anger of the rainbow in various forms. The Wawilak myth describes a journey to the sky followed by a return journey, the result being men's ritual power to re-enact such trips, thereby ensuring the coming of the annual rains. The men re-enact (a) the Sisters' 'incest' and (b) their letting loose of 'floods'.

The 'bird-nester' myths of *Mythologiques* fall within the same transformation group, for the hero who (like the offspring of the Wawilak Sisters) becomes temporarily stranded in the sky (just as boys during initiation are temporarily secluded from this world) is invariably guilty of some 'excessive' longing for conjunction with a female relative, as a result of which he generates seasonal periodicity with its rain and storms (Lévi-Strauss 1970: 35–7). This hero is a 'crying child' or an 'orphan' – one who feels cut off from his mother and the feminine world and insists on being rejoined (Lévi-Strauss 1973: 379–81). Crying babies and orphans seem to have a similar effect in western Arnhem Land as elsewhere in the world: they conjure up fears of excessive maternal desire, and with these, fears of 'floods' and the anger of 'the Rainbow'. The myths tell of babies whose cries trigger floods and storms – presaged by the appearance of a rainbow – which drown whole communities. 'The combination of Orphan and rainbow', the Berndts (1970: 21) remark in this context, 'appears throughout the whole region'. The implication is that the Rainbow Snake is generated or constituted by (a) the too-close attraction between babies and their mothers (precisely the bonds that male initiation rites strive to cut) and (b) the 'excessive' closeness of reproductively potent women themselves. In western Arnhem Land, a woman who is pregnant, menstruating or carrying a child is told *not to go near other women*, particularly if there is water nearby, for fear of generating the Rainbow (Berndt and Berndt 1970: 180). The effect of such taboos is, of course, to atomise women in their experiences of reproductive power.

What is it which makes the moral legislators (almost exclusively male) in Aboriginal Australia insist that when women give birth to babies, they should do so alone? This rule is not always strictly enforced (see for example Hamilton 1981: 27), but almost everywhere it seems to coincide with what men regard as the ideal. Men should 'give birth' collectively; each woman should have to do so alone. Ryan (1969: 46) reports the following isolation rule from a Queensland (Bulloo River) tribe:

No woman must see a baby born except her own, and nobody except the mother of the child must be present at the birth. When a woman knows she is to have a baby, she goes away to a place she has picked for that purpose and there she makes a large fire so as to have plenty of ashes to clean herself and the baby when it arrives. After the baby is born she returns to the camp and then it can be seen by all. She must have no help or aid from anyone. . . .

In this tribe, too, male 'childbirth' – the initiation process through which boys are 'reborn' – is a decidedly collective affair, in starkest contrast with what women are supposed to be allowed (Ryan 1969: 14–15). The logic at work is everywhere the same; so it seems that when the Wawilak myth depicts the closeness of the two Sisters as the birth process begins, a definite point is being made:

The two women stopped to rest, for the younger felt the child she was carrying move inside her. She knew her baby would soon be born. Yeppa [sister], I feel near my heart this baby turning', she said. The older one said, 'Then let us rest.'

They sat down, and the older sister put her hand on the abdomen of the younger sister and felt the child moving inside. She then massaged her younger sister, for she knew her labor pains had commenced. The baby was born there. (Warner 1957: 251)

These mythical women bleed and give birth displaying affection and solidarity with one another, not in lonely isolation. They are in tune with the immense powers vested in one another's physiologies and blood. Is it not these powers which are thought 'too dangerous' by men, and which men's taboos and initiation rites are designed simultaneously to suppress in women, to alienate and to usurp?

Giving birth – where men are concerned – is not just one among other collective activities from time to time performed. It is the most collective, solidarity-engendering of all activities – far more so than hunting ever is.

Male childbirth needs women, but only in a negative sense – for in changing a pubescent child's name and 'killing' it prior to rebirth, the mother's contribution is acknowledged only to be negated and supplanted. The process typically involves seizing frightened young boys from the arms of their mothers in the women's camp and then carrying them off to be 'swallowed by the Snake' within the men's sacred ground. There follow procedures such as cutting the boy's flesh, anointing their bodies with 'menstrual' blood, placing them in a pit or other encircled space symbolising an immense womb or women's hut, blindfolding them, declaring that the Snake/Mother/Rainbow has now swallowed them – and finally, releasing them back for their mothers to see, now covered in red ochre and/or blood and 'reborn'.

An example is the Karwadi initiation ritual of the Murinbata of Western Australia. Here, body-painting with blood is practised on young boys who enter into a symbolic womb. Men stand before the boys holding containers of blood, which is said to be 'the blood of the Mother' (Stanner 1966: 7). They smear the youths 'from head to foot with the blood: eyes, ears, nostrils, lips and nose are all liberally covered. . . . Eventually, the boys emerge from this ordeal 'reborn'. This ritual, it is said, was originally performed by 'the Mother' herself, until men sadly had to kill her and take her place with

artificial replicas of her bloody presence (Stanner 1966: 40, 43, 63).

Among the Ma:ra Aborigines, boys undergoing initiation are symbolically 'swallowed' into the womb of an ancestral 'Mother' called Mumuna. At the end of the ceremony, the initiates are revealed to their mothers – who see them covered from head to foot with a paste made from earth, blood and red-ochre. As the 'blood-covered' boys shine in the sun, the ritual leaders call out: 'Look at the colouring they have on their bodies: they are smeared with the inside liquids of Mumuna's womb!' (Berndt 1951: 160).

Before being allowed to eat normal food or return to female company, the newly reborn and hence 'raw' boys typically have to be 'cooked' – that is, they must have smoke blown over them, or they are made to jump over flames or stay uncomfortably close to a fire. In northern Australia as elsewhere in the continent (Elkin 1938: 167–8), this concluding 'fire' phase of each blood-letting ritual – consistently with the model – signals the removal of blood pollution, the retreat of the Snake, and the simultaneous lifting of the blood-linked taboos which for a period of days or weeks had previously outlawed all cooking, feasting and marital sex (Warner 1957: 324, 328–9). 'The rainbow serpent', as Mountford (1978: 23) puts it, 'is essentially the element of water, and any sign of its opposite element – fire, even fumes of smoke – is sufficient to drive this mythical creature back to its home under the water'.

### The Delineation of Sisterly Power

The 'Snake', we can now see, is a way of describing women and their offspring in such rhythmic intimacy with one another that they feel as if they are 'one flesh', 'one blood' – or one immense 'Mother'. As the Central Australian (Aranda) songs of the *alknarintja* put it, such ritually potent women resemble a clump of bushes 'so thick and so pressed against each other that they cannot move separately' (Róheim 1974: 144). With their blood-flows conjoining, they form into a single flow or stream – its elements as harmoniously conjoined and as inseparable as those of a snake. The Two Sisters who in northern Australian myths 'turn into a rainbow' or are 'swallowed by a Snake' are in reality doing something simple, yet magical enough in its own way. They are entering the 'wet' phase of their menstrual cycle and becoming engulfed in their own blood-derived unity with one another. Like water-women diving into a river, they are being 'swallowed up' in a collective medium transcending the body boundaries of each. It is as if the blood at this point were acting as a snake-like 'skin' embracing them all.

Whenever an out-of-phase woman is brought back into synchrony, it is as if her 'water-sisters' were claiming her back into their realm. A myth from Arnhem Land describes one such process of reclamation. A 'lost' Sister shakes off the man who had led her astray; she returns at last to her true watery element of sisterhood:

And when she drank, all the Murinbungo, the water-lubras, rose up out of the billabong. They had long streaming hair and they called out to her: 'O, sister, where have you been? We cried for you. Come back to us, sister'. The water-lubras reached out their arms to her. They pulled her down to them in the water. (Robinson 1966: 61-6)

These women – 'daughters of the Rainbow' – are indeed 'like a snake', for no creature on earth more closely resembles a river or flow, or can coil itself into so many repeated cycles. And women are indeed 'like a rainbow' – because the blood-flow is not mere physical blood. As the symbol of the sex strike, it carries women as if from world to world. Under the blood's spell, women move from their 'dry' phase to 'the wet', from 'the cooked' to 'the raw', and also from marital life to the world of seclusion and blood unity – just as the rainbow leaps cyclically between sunshine and rain, dry season and wet, earth and sky.

In Aboriginal Australia, then, the 'Snake' is nothing other than women's culture-creating, menstruation-synchronising dance. 'A dance ground is a snake's body', writes Warner (1957: 274) as if in confirmation, 'and it is usually thought of as having the women and children inside it'.

But although mythology knows that 'the Snake' and women's 'dance' are one and the same, male initiation ritualism, as we have seen, inverts all this, attempting to exclude women from their own dance, which must now be monopolised by men. Aboriginal men who dance themselves into a 'Snake' know that they first learned to do this when they 'stole' women's secrets long, long ago in the mythological past – and they know it with quiet confidence because such things do not change, and *they are still doing it today*.

To bring out the ultimate paradox which all this involves, let us conclude this chapter by checking once again with the ritual that re-enacts the Wawilak Sisters myth.

Just before the Yolngu Kunapipi ('fertility/initiation') ceremony begins, Yurlunggur or Julunggul the Snake is heard roaring some distance away; she/he can smell blood. The 'weird sound' of the bull-roarers, Warner (1957: 270) comments, is 'a kind of bellowing roar . . . like that which one imagines a wounded dragon would make'. The terrified boys due to be snatched from their mothers and 'swallowed' have been smeared with red ochre and arm-blood. The snake-like dancing procession of men carries them away, taking them to the male sacred dance ground, whose 'inside' (secret) name is 'the Mother's uterus'. At the same time, however, the dancing men come up to the boys' mothers and female kin, surrounding them. Pointedly, the men refuse to 'swallow' these. Berndt (1951: 42) comments:

The dancing men symbolise Julunggul surrounding the women (the Wauwalak in their *murk* [hut]); but these are not swallowed, because

none are menstruating or have afterbirth blood. 'The men dancing around are smelling, but they smell no odour of blood'.

So when the dancing men approach the women and children, they *discriminate* against the women and girls, resolving to swallow only male offspring, on the paradoxical grounds that their womenfolk are *not bloody* whereas their sons are. We have, then, the insistence that present-day women – in contrast to their mythological ancestresses – at the crucial moment neither menstruate nor smell of blood, and therefore must be excluded from the heart of the ritual. Meanwhile, men and boys can be swallowed because they do menstruate and do smell of blood. The dialectical inversion is complete.

Yet if anything is truly extraordinary about these rituals, it is the extent to which the men are aware of what they are doing. They seem to be consciously tricking the women, who in turn seem to be colluding, to some extent, with a certain collective awareness of what is going on. The sexes are contesting their respective rights to a power whose basic nature is understood. They are struggling for 'the Snake', and both sides know in essence what this means. Sometimes the women are permitted to gain the upper hand, while more often they concede victory to the men. But at Yirkalla, in the lush, game-rich region of north-east Arnhem Land which is the Yolngu people's home, women's solidarity is still very strong, menstrual blood is regarded as 'sacred' in a strikingly positive way, and the struggle for 'the Snake' is therefore a very real, living sexual-political fight.

Two or three nights before the finale of the Kunapipi at Yirkalla, after the boys have passed through 'the core of their Kunapipi experience' (in being swallowed into the Uterus of 'the Mother') all the women dance into the men's sacred ground. Some are painted with red ochre, and decorated 'to dance for coitus' (Berndt 1951: 50). This is 'incestuous' coitus; it must embody the blood unity which is 'the Snake'. It is the women themselves who now hold the power, invading the men's 'sacred' ground and forming themselves into a 'Snake' of their own. The women have their own secret name for this Snake, with which they are supposed to deceive the men, and as they call out this name ('Kitjin') they warn the men not to get too near 'or your bellies will come up like pregnant women'. The men sit down quietly, with heads bent.

It is only once this snake power of the women themselves has been established that the conditions are felt appropriate for the climax of the ceremony – collective and 'incestuous' sexual intercourse within the dance-ground or symbolic 'womb'. Following this genuine, flesh-and-blood 'return to the womb', the initiates are removed in imitation of childbirth from a large menstrual hut/parturition hut representing that in which the Two Wawilak Sisters were swallowed at the beginning of time. Berndt's (1951: 55) male informants observe, in words which seem to display astonishing

consciousness of the fact that all this is something which women should really be doing:

But really we have been stealing what belongs to them (the women), for it is mostly all woman's business; and since it concerns them it belongs to them. Men have nothing to do really, except copulate, it belongs to the women. All that belonging to those Wauwalak, the baby, the blood, the yelling, their dancing, all that concerns the women; but every time we have to trick them. Women can't see what men are doing, although it really is their own business, but we can see their side. This is because all the Dreaming business came out of women – everything; only men take 'picture' for that Julunggul [i.e. men make an artificial reproduction of the Snake]. In the beginning we had nothing, because men had been doing nothing; we took these things from women.

It is one of the severest indictments of twentieth-century anti-evolutionist anthropology that its models have led ethnographers to dismiss such profound Aboriginal insights as scientifically valueless.

## Chapter 14

# The Dragon Within

... and these petrified social conditions must be made to dance by singing their own melody to them.

Karl Marx, *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*  
(1843–4)

The rainbow-snake complex as a rock-art motif extends back in northern Australia for at least 7,000 to 9,000 years, making it 'probably the longest continuing religious belief documented in the world' (Flood 1989: 293). Several authorities (Chaloupka 1984; Lewis 1988) have suggested that the post-glacial sea rise between about 9,000 and 7,000 years ago inspired many of the images; floods and tidal waves may have been conceptualised as an immense 'Snake' submerging much of the Aborigines' former land. Many contemporary Aborigines in coastal regions still see 'the Snake' in something like this way. The Great Snake Thuwathu of the Lardil tribe, Mornington Island, for example, 'only emerges on a high tide' (Memmott 1982: 171). Until recently on this island, menstruating or otherwise reproductively potent women had to be especially careful; their bodily processes could easily conjure up a flood which would risk drowning everyone. 'Babies were therefore not carried over tidal estuaries when groups were moving along the coast' (Memmott 1982: 174).

Lewis (1988: 91) sees the extremely ancient image of the Rainbow Snake in animal-headed form (that is, with prominent 'ears') as a composite construct, its various body-parts connoting the totemic affiliations of the different local groups which came together for ritual performances (figure 23). 'Given the demonstrated continuity of composite Rainbow snakes in the art', he adds, 'I believe it is reasonable to hypothesise that the early rock paintings of this being document rituals that fulfilled a similar function to the rituals of the present time' (Lewis 1988: 91). Just as recent Rainbow Snake rituals embody the widest possible levels of inter-regional solidarity, so the ancient ones functioned to offset the social tensions and fragmentation



*Figure 23* Arnhem Land rock-paintings of Rainbow Snakes with kangaroo-like heads. Colour: dark red. Age: about 7,000–8,000 BP. *Upper:* Deaf Adder Creek headwaters (Lewis 1988: Fig. 122). Two snakes with ears, and three turtles. *Middle:* Stag Creek (Lewis 1988: Fig. 123). Snakes with ears and crocodile tails. *Lower:* Jim Jim Creek (Lewis 1988: Fig. 121). Complex composite Rainbow Snake with ears and crocodile tail, surrounded with bird, yam and flying fox designs (all figures redrawn).

threatened as coastal Aborigines were forced to retreat inland into areas already occupied and perhaps overpopulated by long-settled residents.

Although it would explain only certain aspects of the mythological motif, Lewis' interpretation can readily be integrated with our model. *The Snake is an image of human solidarity*. In Lewis' (1988: 91) words, 'the Rainbow snake symbolises the possibilities of alliance among clan groups; it is a means of inclusion, a counter-balance against tensions that tend to fragment larger social groups'. Humans have always harnessed aspects of the natural order to the requirements of the moral order – ascribing sickness, storms, hunting failures and so forth to the anger of 'the spirits' or 'the gods'. Aboriginal ritual authorities under changing social conditions may well have attempted to make use of post-Pleistocene floods in a similar way, drawing on traditional linkages between lunar/tidal rhythms and 'the Snake' whilst arguing that particularly disastrous flood-tides came as punishment for allowing the obligations of solidarity to be abandoned.

But of course, the model of cultural origins advocated in this book would lead us to trace the underlying abstract logic of the Rainbow Snake (although not necessarily its imagery) much further back into the Aborigines' past – indeed, right back to their first entry into Australia. The model would imply that shoreline-foraging Aboriginal women from earliest times phase-locked with the tides, and correspondingly conceptualised themselves as immersed once a month in a 'flood' of blood-symbolised togetherness transcending the individuality of each participant. In their monthly menstrual immersion or sex strike – as in any strike – the participants would have felt their separate identities being transcended in that of the great kinship coalition which together they formed. As time passed, this entity would have become conceptualised through a variety of different images, no one of which would in itself have seemed adequate to symbolise the experienced reality in its full richness and complexity. 'Mother', 'All-Mother', 'Rainbow' and many other images would all have been tried. We know, however, that one of the most recurrent iconographic motifs came to be that of an immense sea-, river- or lake-dwelling 'Snake'.

### An International Myth

Not only can 'the Snake' be assumed to extend back to the first entry of modern humans into Australia. Its centrality to world mythology (Mundkur 1983) implies that it is older still. Mountford (1978: 23) notes that versions of the Rainbow Snake myth 'appear to belong to all peoples, irrespective of time and race'. Ancient Hebraic patriarchal mythology is familiar with supernaturally potent snake imagery in association with female 'evil'. In the myth of Genesis, it was when the Serpent tempted Eve to 'taste the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil' that humanity first realised *the distinction between the sexes* (Leach 1961b). Equally familiar to Bible-readers is

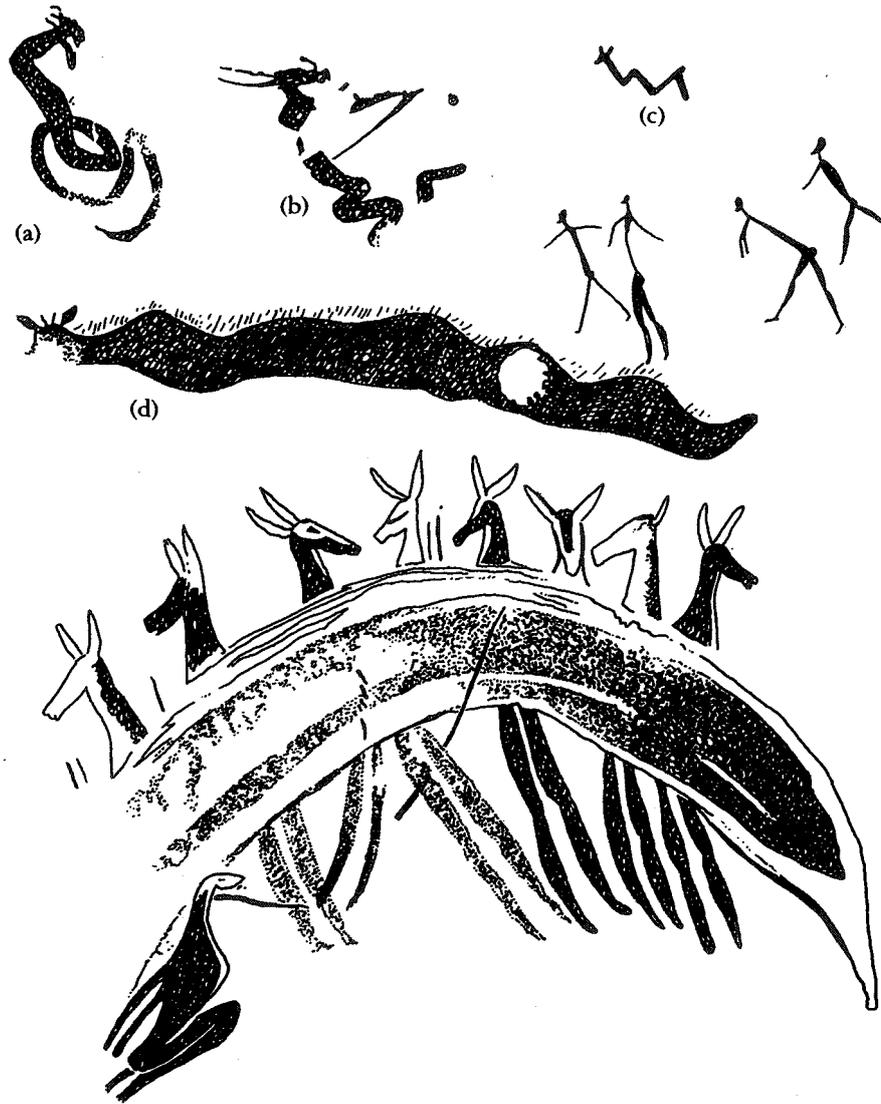
a story about being swallowed and regurgitated by a whale, and another narrative about a primaevial flood, the guardianship of animals in and through this flood, a pan-human watery 'death' followed by 'rebirth' – and a covenant between God and humankind written across the skies in the shape of a rainbow (Gen. 9, 12–17; see Dundes 1988).

Even under a stricter definition, 'The Rainbow Snake', 'Great Sea Snake' or 'Water Snake' is not just Australian. Astonishingly similar beliefs concerning an immense, visually striking, water-dwelling snake linked with the rainbow are widespread in tropical and subtropical regions in the Far East, Africa and the Americas (Blacker 1978; Forge 1966: 25, 29; Hugh-Jones, C. 1979; Hugh-Jones, S. 1979; Huxley 1962: 188; Loewenstein 1961; Mead 1933, 1941; Reichel-Dolmatoff 1968: 79; Schafer 1973; Werner 1933). Even far from the tropics, Celtic mythology once filled all deep lakes and inlets with watery snake-like beings – the Loch Ness Monster being nowadays the best known. Comparable traditions extend even further north. Monsters such as the dragon-like *palraiyyuk* and the 'man-worm' of the Bering Sea Eskimo show that mythical serpentine creatures can survive even when transported to arctic habitats which in reality are uninhabitable to reptiles of any kind (Borden 1976: 441).

### Africa

Among the Central African Luba, 'the rainbow, *nkongolo*, is formed by two snakes coupling in the sky' (Reefe 1981: 24). 'Nkongolo' is also the name of the first ritual ruler of the Luba; de Heusch (1975: 366) notes how Luba origin-of-kingship myths turn, at certain points, on 'the transformation of the image of the rainbow into that of a continuous stream of menstrual blood. . .'

The Mbuti of the Ituri Forest, Zaire, tell the story of a couple crossing a stream on what they thought was a fallen tree: they were carried down under the water by *Klima* – 'the dead tree which was really the rainbow which was really a water animal' (Turnbull 1959: 56). Comparable 'water animals' are central to the mythology of almost all known sub-Saharan African hunter-gatherer groups, and are prominent in much prehistoric rock-painting. Curiously – just as in ancient northern Australian rock-art – these snakes are often depicted with prominent 'ears' (figure 24a). Brincker (1886: 163; quoted by Schmidt 1979: 209) writes of the boa-constrictor associated with the mythical snake *ondara* of the Herero: 'It is said to have two "flaps" at the head, similar to goats' ears with which it makes a noise'. Such noise-making, big-eared creatures, whether in real life or in rock-art, are known as 'rain snakes'; in some regions they merge into images of the more generalised 'rain-animal', 'rain-eland' or 'rain-bull' with its crescent 'horns' (Schmidt 1979). This 'eland' or 'bull' is central to rain-making magic and may be 'accompanied by rainbows, lightning, fishes or snakes' (Pager 1975: 45). The



*Figure 24* San paintings from rock shelters in the Ndedema Gorge, Drakensberg Mountains, Natal. *Upper:* snakes with antelope heads, horns and/or ears (Pager 1972: Fig. 377). Locations: Van der Riet Shelter (a); Sebaaieni Cave (b); Junction Shelter (c); Bemani Shelter (d). *Lower:* a row of antelope heads above a rainbow, while human legs protrude below and an 'ales' (flying magical antelope) crouches nearby. The scene probably relates to the shamanic experience of metamorphosis through dance and trance (Pager 1972: Fig. 384; all figures redrawn).

connection with rainbows (figure 24) is recurrently stressed (Schmidt 1979: 209–20). Schmidt (1979: 220) argues that the *eland* originally lay at the core of what she terms the 'trickster/moon/lightning/rain/fertility/life/eland/horns' symbolic chain which was central to the ancient southern African hunter-gatherer cultures. 'The mythical *likongoro* of the Okavongo', she writes, 'whose name could also be translated as "rainbow", resembled, when in the water, a horned snake, but outside – a kudu!' Linking this with images of antelope-headed snakes in rock-art, she goes on to suggest that the serpents with 'horns' or 'ears' belong in the same category; among the Sandawe, she notes, "'the word for 'ears' . . . and 'horns' . . . may both be used to describe the horns of the moon'" (Schmidt 1979: 220, quoting Ten Raa 1969: 41). (Even in European Christian traditions of demonology, it might be added, 'the Serpent' is a creature who has been depicted by artists fully equipped with cloven feet, horns and a head remarkably like that of a goat).

A snake is liquidly 'flowing' in its movements – flowing as no other animal can be. But in southern Africa as elsewhere, there can be no doubt that 'the Snake' signifies 'that which flows' in a much wider symbolic sense, including streaming water, torrents of rain, rivers – and above all, *blood*, whether animal or menstrual. All of these phenomena equally are manifestations of the underlying abstract entity, 'that which flows'. Etymology in some instances seems to confirm this. In the Khoekhoe language, for example, the words for 'snake' – *laub* – and 'fountain' – *laus* – are etymologically almost identical, the difference being that the first ends with the feminine suffix, *-s*, while the second takes its masculine counterpart, *-b*. Sharing the common root, *lau*, both terms originally meant 'the flowing one' or 'the flow-er'. Animal or human blood is 'the flowing one' in a similar sense; in Khokhoe, the colour red, *lava*, takes its origin from *lau*, to bleed; hence *lava* or *laava*, blood-like, blood-coloured – i.e. red (Hahn 1881: 79).

'The Snake', in short, corresponds to the same symbolic blood construct as has been central to this book's argument up to this point. It is blood, namely, to the extent that its outflowing links menstruants with raw or living animal flesh, preventing hunters from immediately appropriating their own kills. Without this paradigm, in any event, it would seem difficult to explain formulations such as the following, which encapsulates the San belief system which we have been discussing: 'A special snake lives between the horns of all eland, and before eland meat can be consumed, it has to be "purified" of the venomous juices it contains' (Vinnicombe 1976: 233).

In accordance with the same logic, we find that over much of southern Africa, rain animals and first-menstruants merge into one another. Depending on the precise region, either one or the other may be led out into the bush to attract rain. When it is an animal, it is killed so that its rain-making blood, uterine fluids or urine can bring on the rains. When it is a girl, she only has to menstruate (Schmidt 1979). Among the !Kung of the Kalahari,

the construct which I am here terming 'menstrual potency' – child-making, rain-making, culture-establishing blood-magic – is known as *now*:

With childbearing for women and with killing the great antelope for men . . . the *now* has a . . . complex effect. In these cases the *now* of the hunter interacts with the *now* of the antelope, the *now* of the woman interacts with the *now* of the child newly born, and when the blood of the antelope falls upon the ground as the antelope is killed, when the fluid of the womb falls upon the ground at the child's birth, the interacting of *nows* takes place, and this brings a change in the weather. (Thomas 1959: 162)

Equally instructive is a G/wi version, in this case more directly menstrual. The female subject has just emerged from her first menstrual seclusion:

the girl is grabbed by the younger women of the band and rushed out, away from the small group of grass huts which is the village. Shouting and laughing they run her in a circle and then back into her hut. This is a 'rainstorm' and the noise is excitement and joy at 'getting wet'. (Silberbauer 1963: 21)

Hahn (1881: 87), writing rather earlier, found an even richer Khoekhoe variant:

The girl or girls who have become of age must, after the festival, run about in the first thunderstorm, but they must be quite naked, so that the rain which pours down washes the whole body. The belief is that they will get fruitful and have a large offspring. I have on three occasions witnessed this running in the thunder-rain, when the roaring of the thunder was deafening and the whole sky appeared to be one continual flash of lightning.

Just as menstruating girls throughout the region symbolically *become* 'wet' whilst simultaneously *turning into* an eland or other game animal, the Khoekhoe link this rain-attracting, menstruation-linked, thunder-and-lightning-generating magic to an aquatic 'snake' which, according to one classical authority, was "so large that when its head is resting on the north bank of the Orange River, its tail is still on the south bank" (quoted in Carstens 1975: 90; see also Hahn 1881; Schmidt 1979). The Griqua tell how the 'Great Watersnake' of the Orange River catches pubescent girls to become 'his' wives; this is puzzling, however, because the snake is actually called Keinaus – that is, it is in this case given the *feminine* ending –s! (Schmidt 1979: 211). Indeed, there are many other indications that this particular creature has failed to undergo so extreme a political inversion as is common in Australia and elsewhere in the world. *It is still on the side of women.* Among the Khoekhoe:

The Big Snake is hated by all males, towards whom it is equally unfavourably disposed, and it is said to become angry at the sight or smell (especially the latter) of a male. Moreover, the snake when angry is believed to give off a smell which is lethal to all males, and it spews a deadly venom. On the other hand, women are believed to fall in love with the Big Snake, which is also said to have fallen in love with certain women, some of whom are alleged to have had sexual intercourse with it and conceived children. (Carstens 1975: 90).

This easygoing, intimate relationship between women and their 'Snake' – whose deadly 'smell' or 'venom' suggests, of course, women's own husband-repelling blood – may be linked to the fact that among the Khoekhoe, as among other San herders and/or hunter-gatherers, 'there seems to be . . . possibly a slight *female* dominance in the husband/wife relationship' (Barnard 1977: 6). Hahn (1881: 19) makes a rather stronger statement:

In every Khokhoi's house the woman, or *taras*, is the *supreme ruler*, the husband has nothing at all to say. While in public the men take the prominent part, at home they have not so much power even as to take a mouthful of sour milk out of the tub, without the wife's permission.

But we may end this section by recalling a still more instructive Snake-Woman, first touched on in Chapter 4. Menstruation is not central in this particular account. But flowing water, a python-linked sex strike and the repulsion of husbands is.

Among the Igbo in Eastern Nigeria, in the Idemili local government area, the Idemili stream is said to be a python or water spirit and is addressed as 'Mother'. All creatures in it are sacred and must not be killed, the python-goddess forbidding the spilling of her blood. Her shrine is located nearby, guarded by a priest who is 'female' in that he has to tie his wrapper like women do, not loincloth fashion, like men (Amadiume 1987: 53–4).

This shrine priest was important, but 'the favoured one of the goddess Idemili and her earthly manifestation' was the Agba Ekwe, an authoritative woman who headed the Inyom Nnobi or 'Women of Nnobi'. This was in effect an ancient, traditional 'trade union', whose multiple 'eyes' were those of all its members as they watched for, reported and retaliated against sexual misbehaviour or violence. Anyone – male or female – who angered a group of women would risk being told by them that they might soon see, with their own eyes, 'how the python basked in the sun'. 'The python', Amadiume (1987: 68n) explains,

is known to loathe the sun, consequently it usually lies in the shade of bushes, under trees or in caves. Only as a result of acute hunger does it appear in the sun. When it does, it appears full of rage, becomes

entangled and suffocates and swallows anything within sight, human or animal. It then returns to the shade and lies there for months, digesting its victim. During this period it is the most harmless creature in the world!

The meetings of the Women's Council were held in private; great secrecy surrounded them. Like some dragon guarding her treasures and secrets – or like a modern strike committee in the midst of a bitter dispute – the Inyom Nnobi ensured that any women's representative who broke ranks and betrayed her sisters by revealing their discussions would be ostracised by all. 'The men were said to be uneasy every time a Women's Council was called, since they were unaware of what would be discussed, or what the women might decide to do' (Amadiume 1987: 67).

All this gives us a wonderful glimpse into the identity of that Snake-linked 'monster' whose secrets were eventually 'stolen' by men in the many traditional myths about a 'primitive matriarchy' studied in Chapter 12. The Inyom Nnobi clearly was 'the python' or physical manifestation of 'the Goddess'. In a real way, this 'python' *did* 'swallow up' or 'seize' women and babies from men. *Its basic weapon was that of the strike*. When women throughout the community were ordered by the Inyom Nnobi to strike, 'all domestic, sexual and maternal services' were withdrawn, women carrying only suckling babies as they left their husbands *en masse* (Amadiume 1987: 67). Among the typical offences provoking such action, two are worth singling out. If anyone either (a) sexually molested a young girl while she was travelling along a bush path or (b) killed a python, it was regarded as an assault upon *all women* and therefore an affront to the goddess herself. She withdrew the female flesh which it was her responsibility above all to protect. Although varying levels of action were resorted to, all-out, community-wide strike action against *all men* was the time-honoured response if all else failed (Amadiume 1987: 122). It is perhaps worth noting – as we grope towards an understanding of the world's dragon-legends – that only an extremely ruthless and violent 'dragon-slayer' could have coped with such many-headed potency as this.

### America

In parts of the New World, particularly in South America, the parallels with Aboriginal Australian ritual and mythology seem closer than in the Igbo or southern African cases: masculinist sexual-political inversions have followed a more familiar course – leading, often, to Australian-American identities which become quite astonishing. They extend to almost identical matriarchy myths, to the use of bull-roarers, to male symbolic menstruation – and to the concept of a rainbow-like 'Snake' which has a special, *now supposedly 'dangerous'* affinity with menstruating women.

'The conception of the rainbow as a large water serpent', writes Métraux (1946: 40), 'is widespread in South America'. Métraux documents the belief among the Arawak, Arekuna, Caxinawa, Ipurina, Carajá, Cocama, Chiriguano, Guarañi, Bororó, Lengua, Vilela, Inca and Araucanians – a conservative list, since the belief undoubtedly spread much further. 'One of the most formidable demons known to the Indians', wrote Karsten (1935: 220) of the Quechua-speaking tribes,

is the huge water boa, called *amárum* . . . It is the original source of witchcraft and the souls of sorcerers specially are believed to take up their abode, temporarily or permanently, in this monster. Now, in the imagination of the Indians the rainbow (*cuichi*) is nothing but a huge boa in the air or, as they generally express it, the rainbow is the 'shadow of the boa'.

One superstition held about this phenomenon, continues Karsten, is that it makes women pregnant: 'When the rainbow appears, therefore, the women who are menstruating ought not to go out lest an accident of this kind should happen to them.'

In the Andes, Aymara speakers share similar beliefs with the Quechua. 'Serpents are thought to be attracted by menstrual fluids, and they may pursue menstruating women, entering them through the vagina while they sleep or when the have become inebriated' (Bolton 1976: 441).

Myths from the Gran Chaco tribes – such as the Toba and the Pilagá – describe how incautious young menstruants, disobeying their seclusion rules, provoke floods unleashed by 'the Rainbow', and as a result are drowned along with their entire communities (Métraux 1946: 29–30). Likewise, the Amazonian Waiwai have a complex set of beliefs according to which all women are in some original sense the great water-snake's property. Men's wives belonged once to 'the Anaconda-people', a snake-like community consisting of water-boas, large fish and similar creatures who live at the bottom of rivers, but can assume human form when they surface from time to time. All women are the kin of these Anaconda-people, who exercise a constant claim over men's wives as a result. The first human husband is said to have seized his water-dwelling wife from the Anaconda-people without paying them the proper bride-price. 'They therefore want bride-price or a woman in exchange . . .' (Fock 1963: 31). The Anacondas, in other words, constantly and *legitimately* attempt to reclaim the female flesh which is theirs. Young women are particularly at risk of being reclaimed should they *look towards the river whilst undergoing their first menstruation ritual* (Fock 1963: 48).

This is important, because it allows us to make the necessary links with the Nigerian strike-organising python-goddess Idemili discussed earlier – affording a rare glimpse into the logic behind all those many myths, throughout the world, which tell of a watery Snake's primordial periodic power over women, and its 'cruel demands' for what men choose to interpret

as the 'sacrifice' of marriageable young maidens. What the Women of Nnobi would have thought of as a young maiden's withdrawal from sexual circulation by her gender group is experienced by men as a tragic waste of a desirable maiden who could have been sexually enjoyed! Interestingly, the Waiwai themselves have just such a myth. It concerns a gigantic Serpent who once used to kill all who approached:

After it had been appealed to, it agreed to kill no more provided the most beautiful woman in the tribe was sacrificed to it. She was then cast into a lake on the north slope of the Acarai mountain, which was the abode of the serpent. Here she still lives. The serpent, satisfied, no longer molests the Waiwai. (Fock 1963: 53, citing Farabee 1924: 174)

### The World-dragon

Most of us have been brought up since infancy in vague familiarity with legends of this kind. Images of a lake-dwelling, winged, fabulous, woman-devouring, kingdom-ruling, tribute-demanding 'Snake' have come down to us as the central motif in countless fairy-tales which still have the power to enchant – many of them translated from the mythologies of Tibet, China, Japan, India, pre-Columbian Central America, the Middle or Near East, pre-Christian Europe or some other corner of the globe. In most translations, the monster has been given its properly recognisable, heraldically fixed form. The name traditionally used by folklorists to refer to this extraordinary, blood-loving, weather-changing, coiling magical monster is, of course – 'the Dragon'.

Just as 'the Seven Sisters' are found in mythology throughout the world, often connoting seven women who retaliate against their lazy or cruel husbands by rising up into the sky to become the Pleiades (Buckley 1988: 200, citing Harrington 1931: 142–5, Reid 1939: 246–8; Hahn 1881: 74), so the *seven-headed dragon* is an international motif. Here is a Japanese version:

A man came to a house where all were weeping, and learned that the last of seven daughters of the house was to be given to a dragon with seven heads, which came to the seashore yearly to claim a victim. The man changed himself into the girl's form, and induced the dragon to drink sake from seven pots set before it. He then slew the drunken monster. (Ingersoll 1928: 65, 6)

Naturally, the hero then married the maiden himself. From the end of the dragon's tail, he 'took out a sword which is today the Mikado's state sword'. The ritual power of the divine ruler, then is the usurped or stolen power of 'the Dragon'.

This, too, is a common theme. The ancient divine kings and emperors of most of the world were according to Elliot Smith (1919: 76–139), identified with dragons whose blood-making and rain-making powers were associated

with the tides, floods and potencies of the moon. Solidarity in its original forms was of course turned on its head by these often-violent patriarchal rulers. But as in the case of male initiation rites throughout the world, so when divine rulers were being enthroned or empowered, trickery of the kind depicted in the myths was the order of the day. The Japanese dragon-slayer, as we have just seen, *dressed up as a woman*. Secluded from the sun and carried above the ground, he and similar divine kings and priest-kings were treated *as if* they were menstruants whose rain-making and other magical powers needed preserving for the good of the realm (Frazer 1900: 3: 204). The Chinese emperor Yao was said to be 'the son of a dragon'; several other Chinese rulers were metaphorically called 'dragon-faced' (Ingersoll 1928: 100). In all these cases, solidarity's symbols – the 'Dragon' foremost among them – had been politically usurped and then used *against* the very forces from whom they had initially been derived. All those rulers who sought 'The Mandate of Heaven' – claiming to root their power not in earthly sources but in patterns written in the skies – were stealing an authority which was never legitimately their own. The notion of divine rule 'in harmony with the celestial spheres' stemmed ultimately from Womankind's time-honoured reliance on the moon as the source of her synchrony and therefore of her power. Whenever and wherever men have claimed to possess any such mandate, it has been a deception and usurpation. The first representatives of ritual or 'supernatural' authority were menstruating women. The first 'mandate of heaven' was the legitimacy won by women when – in some ways like their distant descendants in the Paris Commune of 1871, or more recently in Tienanmen Square on that night of the dark moon in June 1989 – they wrote out culture's rules in their own blood.

A seven-headed dragon is central to mythology in Cambodia, India, Persia, western Asia, East Africa and the Mediterranean area. In parts of Scotland, the seven-headed sea monster comes 'in a storm of wind and spray' (Elliot Smith 1919; cited in Ingersoll 1928: 105). But if we now disregard the precise number of heads – seven, a hundred, a thousand or more – the monster becomes still more international. In most of the world's great patriarchal foundation myths – Perseus and Andromeda, Heracles and the Hydra, Zeus and Typhon, Marduk and Tiamat, Indra and Vritra, St George and the Dragon and so forth (Fontenrose 1959) – a coiling, wet, reptilian, blood-red, fire-breathing 'plumed' or 'winged' Serpent with its multiple heads and all-seeing eyes carries off marriageable maidens to the world beyond men's reach, doing so periodically and to the accompaniment of flood tides and storms. Woman are considered to be in need of male rescue from this fate, a task which is accomplished by the patriarchal hero only after an immense struggle in which the cords or coils binding the earth to the heavens are cut and the magical potencies of the dragon – including above all

its powers over women – are triumphantly stolen for the benefit of mankind.

These potencies have everything to do with the dragon's ability to produce blood: the many-headed water-dwelling Hydra is typical in that its 'heads' sprouted up wherever its blood flowed, so that merely cutting off a head achieved nothing – the bleeding stumps had to be cauterised with fire (Kerényi 1959: 143–4, citing Apollodorus *Mythographus* 2.5.2). In Aboriginal Australia, too – where the Rainbow Snake is often said to be the source of women's menstrual flows – it is only when men can surround and isolate menstruating flesh with *fire* that they feel safe from the dangers that the Serpent represents. Everything which uncontrollably 'flows' threatens to summon up the evil; the way to keep it down is to use fire to dry up the world-threatening blood (Berndt 1970: 180; Mountford 1978: 23–4). The atomisation of menstruating womankind and the chopping up of her Serpent into isolated, impotent bits of flesh can be seen to be one and the same.

In his scholarly treatise on the explicitly lunar-menstrual 'Tsunil-Goam: The supreme being of the Khoi-khoi', Hahn (1881: 79–80) extends his argument from southern Africa to what he calls 'the whole realm of Indo-European folk-lore and mythology'. Everywhere, he writes, legends of dragons and serpents have their origin on the banks of lakes and rivers:

We refer to Hercules, who killed the Lernaic Hydra. Apollo kills Python close to a fine flowing fountain. . . . At the fountain of Ares watched a dragon, who refused water to Kadmos and his followers. In Switzerland, if rivers break down from the mountains after a thunderstorm, the people say: 'a dragon has come out'. In Denmark Müllenhof found a legend, that in the spot where once a Lindwurm's (i.e., a dragon's) tail was to be seen, now a brook is winding'. Beowulf kills the dragon who lives in the lake. Acheloös, the River-god, became a serpent when Hercules fought for Deianeira. Siegfried kills the dragon in the cavern on the Rhine; and many more instances too numerous to mention.

In most instances, the dragon-slayer confronts the Snake in order to wrest from its clutches the maiden caught up in its embrace.

The Wawilak myth central to Chapter 13 is therefore significant precisely because it is not unique. Its value resides in the fact that it is just one of the more beautiful, exhaustively recorded and complete dragon legends known to us – complete because recorded unusually fully in the context of its *basis in ritual*. But what is interesting is that wherever in the world it is found, 'the Dragon' remains true to itself. Like this book's central construct of 'sex strike' or 'blood', it is always a male-dominance-threatening 'stream' or 'flow' (Hahn 1881: 77–8), the principle of alternation and opposition, the dialectic itself incarnate. It is water which retreats before fire, animal which reveals itself as human, a snake which nonetheless flies, female which is also male, death which is also life. Taller than the tallest tree, itself often coiled around the 'world-tree', immense and brilliant as the rainbow – it carries those who

ride it between life and death, marriage and kinship, fire and water, sunshine and rain.

Such adventures are the stuff of Lévi-Strauss' 'bird-nester' myths, which are dragon myths in yet another form. The heroes of these strange narratives are 'incestuous' boys who in their hunger for their own kin are often linked with the moon (1981: 350), and are invariably 'secluded' in some menstrually suggestive way. These boys, as they go hunting for eagles' eggs or for macaws' brilliant red feathers up in the sky, become men in the manner of Yolngu youths. Painted in blood (or a substitute such as faeces), they are engulfed in 'rawness', 'rotteness', 'stench' and 'temporary death', and – ritually secluded from ordinary society – are as if stranded in the sky. After their experience of symbolic 'death', they then return to earthly life safely – now in possession of immense weather-controlling, rain-making, healing and other magical powers.

The Yolngu ritual participants who act out the Wawilak story go to the sky in a Rainbow Snake's womb, which therefore takes the place of the red-feathered, bird-bedecked, blood-or-faeces-bespattered, magically growing, man-eating 'trees', 'cliffs' and other strange vehicles which take youths to the sky in Lévi-Strauss' 'bird-nester' tales. When the Navaho bird-nester Nayenezgani wraps himself in the blood-filled intestines of 'the Horned Monster', pricking himself so that the blood covers his body and using the monster's stomach as a 'mask', he is re-entering a symbolic blood-filled womb and *thereby* entering the other world. His narrow escape from being eaten alive, and his subsequent adventures in vanquishing such terrifying monsters as 'Snapping Vagina' and 'Overwhelming Vagina' (Haile and Wheelwright 1949: 73–4) help confirm that the usurpation and simultaneous political inversion of women's menstrual powers is what such dragon-slaying or monster-vanquishing initiatory experiences are really all about. Today's gods and goddesses become tomorrow's demons and monsters. In voices of lightning and thunder, storms and floods of blood, women once gave awesome expression to 'the anger of the gods'. It was these empowered forces which had to be defied before patriarchy could be safely enthroned.

We have seen that women, in shedding their own blood, seem to die, but that this kind of death is only temporary. Instead of continuing until death, the blood-flow seems to be set in reverse, so that women return from watery seclusion back once again into marital life with its sex, cooking, consumption and other pleasures. Women resurrect themselves monthly, just as does the moon, and all animal life is thought to renew itself at the same time.

The drying up of the flow and the kindling of domestic fire appear in the myths as this reverse movement: from seclusion back to ordinary life, from 'sky' to 'earth', from 'death' to 'new life'. The 'swallowed' flesh is 'regurgitated' once more. The 'bird-nester' descends gently to earth and 'wakes up'. It is this kind of experience – a male usurpation of the periodicity of the menstrual flow – which is undergone by boys during initiation rites all over

the world. For men to carry the burdens of these menstrual rhythms has been no easy thing, but the myths of much – perhaps all – of humanity testify that it can and has been done.

### *Mythologiques* Regained

The early chapters of this book focused on Lévi-Strauss' 'exchange of women' theory, on his treatment of 'totemism' and on related themes. Although many 'totemic' and other aspects of ritual and mythology have now been re-evaluated in the light of our model, it may still seem that the net result has been to pose more problems than have yet been answered. In returning to the work of Lévi-Strauss, let us see if we can tie up the remaining loose threads. *Mythologiques* poses the most perplexing intellectual challenges; consequently, we will confine ourselves to the four volumes of this work.

Although this is not the place to give a full or in any sense adequate description of Lévi-Strauss' findings in *Mythologiques*, it does seem important to recall that linkages between daily, monthly and seasonal forms of periodicity are a central unifying theme of the myths collected together and analysed with unprecedented thoroughness by the founder of structuralism in *Mythologiques*. The myths discussed in volume 3 – *The Origin of Table Manners* (1978) – explicitly centre around periodicity in lunar and menstrual forms. While many of the narratives analysed in the other three volumes seemingly relate to different themes, Lévi-Strauss shows that the stories are in reality transformations of one another, so that the logic underlying them can be seen to be ultimately the same.

The myths, according to Lévi-Strauss, are generated by logical and sociological problems. These are varied, but relate essentially to difficulties encountered in attempting to preserve the coherence of certain mental structures – logical thought processes – which in turn are tied up with the maintenance of certain sexual, economic and other social taboos and regulations. Those collectivities preserving, reworking and telling the myths seem to feel threatened with various forms of cultural chaos and structural collapse. Social contradictions are conceptualised in formal terms on the logical plane, appearing as logical contradictions which the myths attempt to sort out.

To the extent that the myths, taken collectively, have a surface ideological message or aim, it is the achievement of moderation and balance in all things – the definition of what is 'excessive' depending, of course, on the conceptual system being used. Models of balance and harmony in social life are shown against a backdrop of various expressions of extremism or excess. At the core of the collective concerns are male anxieties (female ones are not equally represented) of a sexual kind.

In this respect, men's fears essentially concern women. Women can be

'too clinging' or 'too distant', 'too near' or 'too far', 'too hot' or 'too cold', 'too seductive' or 'too shy' and so on. The various extreme possibilities are pictured by means of metaphorical techniques in which a 'distant' woman becomes, for example, a constellation of stars in the sky, or a 'too clinging' woman becomes a limpet-like clinging frog. In addition to metaphor, the full range of expressive techniques known to literature and song are employed.

The first of Lévi-Strauss' four volumes, *The Raw and the Cooked* (1970), selects myths dealing with the function of cooking-fire as something which transforms raw, bloody and hence tabooed meat into edible food. Normally, raw meat – characteristically thought of in the native (or native/Lévi-Straussian) paradigms as 'very wet' – should be transformed into cooked meat, which is properly 'moist' or 'moderately dry'. If men's alimentary needs are to be met, two extremes have to be avoided in this respect. On the one hand, if there were no fire at all, the meat with its blood would go 'rotten' – this being the most extreme form of the category 'very wet'. On the other hand, if there were too much fire, the meat would become 'burnt', the most extreme form of the category 'very dry'. There is a need, therefore, for *both* fire *and* the negation of fire. This combination of opposites finds its embodiment in the ideal of 'domestic fire' – fire which does not burn endlessly or uncontrollably but is kept instead within strict temporal and spatial bounds. In the 'key myth' with which *The Raw and the Cooked* begins, such fire is bounded safely by the 'very wet' – in this case not (or not explicitly) by menstrual blood, but by the torrents of a rainstorm. This storm is magically controlled by the hero of the myth – an incestuous 'bird nester' whose weather-changing powers are granted to him when he is eaten alive from the waist down and made to suffer acute anal incontinence (a version of male surrogate 'menstruation') while stranded in the sky. The rain extinguishes all fires in the world with the exception of just one (Lévi-Strauss 1970: 37, 137).

The myths use an elaborate series of codes in order to link up the twin dangers of uncontrolled fire on the one hand and the absence of fire on the other, with some formally homologous dangers presented in connection with men's sexual needs. The logic behind these connections, reduced to the simplest form possible, seemingly runs as follows:

1. Whereas men's hunger relates them to animal flesh, their sexual desire relates them to female human flesh.
2. Human female flesh presents itself to men in accordance with a logic of alternation which is shared by animal flesh as well. For example, like animal flesh, female sexual flesh should alternate predictably between the states of 'very wet' (bloody, raw) and 'suitably moist' ('cooked' to a moderate extent – i.e. transformed so that all visible blood is removed, but without being 'burnt' or 'dried up').
3. The agent of such transformation in the case of both human female

and animal flesh is 'cooking-fire'. In the case of human female flesh, the 'cooking-fire' which stops the flow of blood may also be conceptualised as internal to the woman.

4. The 'cooking-fire' inside a woman's vulva – the invisible physiological mechanism responsible for doing to female flesh what cooking-fire does to meat – is theoretically liable to malfunction. In such a case, women's menstrual flows might either (a) last indefinitely (the flesh moving from being 'very wet' to a state of 'rotteness') or (b) never come at all (the flesh becoming 'dried up').
5. Translated from the 'sexual code' into the 'alimentary code', these dangers become: (a) the complete absence of cooking-fire, so that nothing can prevent all meat from becoming 'rotten' and (b) uncontrolled fire, so that everything gets burned up.

Whilst concerned with avoiding the extremes of 'the rotten world' on the one hand and 'the burnt world' on the other, the stories in fact bind these alternatives intimately within a dialectic of 'the near' and 'the far', 'the high' and 'the low', 'the inside' and 'the outside' and so forth. And the choices and extremes are expressed in a variety of different codes, one of the most central being 'the astronomical code', which describes conjunctions and disjunctions between 'wet' and 'dry', 'animal' and 'human' forms of flesh in terms of cosmic conjunctions and disjunctions involving earth, sun, moon and other celestial bodies.

In the astronomical code, uncontrolled cooking-fire is typically represented in terms of the sun's conjoining with the earth and burning it up in a universal conflagration. The complete absence of fire – associated with an unending blood-flow – is depicted through the image of universal darkness and a flood which submerges the entire world. The correct balance is depicted with the help of the moon, which should be the right distance from the sun, just as the sun should be the right distance from both moon and earth. This correct distance is conceptualised both spatially and in terms of periods of time: neither spells of sunlight nor periods of darkness and floods should last 'too long', nor pass 'too quickly'. Since everything is interlinked, it is by controlling carefully both menstrual periodicity and fire – or, in other words, *women*, who are the custodians of both – that such cosmic catastrophes are averted. Fire and the menstrual flow are the elements which, properly controlled, act to mediate between the cosmic poles of which the universe is composed, keeping them always the right distances apart in terms of both space and time (Lévi-Strauss 1970: 64, 137, 139, 289, 293–4; 1973: 115, 165, 303–4, 471; 1978: 77–9, 83, 109–12, 126–7, 143, 185–90, 221–5, 500–6).

The second volume of *Mythologiques*, *From Honey to Ashes*, selects myths which clarify the basic logic by showing it up against a background of contrasting terms associated with the concept of 'cooking'. Honey is a

substance which, without being cooked at all, is already highly edible – as if it had been ‘cooked’ already by the bees. Tobacco-smoke, on the other hand, can only be consumed in an opposite fashion – after the tobacco has been not merely ‘cooked’ but truly ‘burned’.

A central figure in this second volume is the ‘Girl Mad About Honey’ – a woman whose appetite for sweetness is associated with (a) the full moon and (b) her ‘excessive’ sexual desires. These myths from the Chaco region place the blame for the fact that men ‘had to’ overthrow the Rule of Women on the seductive behaviour of this girl (1973: 286). She is incapable of observing sexual self-restraint; consequently she – and all women through her – must cede this culture-preserving responsibility to men. She is the symmetrical inversion of the woman whose menstrual period never ends. Instead of representing permanent sexual disjunction (floods, darkness, ‘the rotten world’), she represents permanent ‘honeymoon’ (coded as light and fire – the girl is ‘dry’ in the sense of being always ‘thirsty’, and is in some versions ‘the daughter of the Sun’).

In connection with all this, perhaps the most important point Lévi-Strauss makes is a sociological one. Unlike raw meat, honey is *not* taboo to the person who finds it. The fact that it does not need to be cooked is inseparable from the fact that it does not need to be *exchanged*:

the heroine who is mad about honey is giving in to nature: she covets honey in order to eat it straight away, thus diverting it from its cultural function as a mediator of matrimonial exchanges. (1978: 271)

In effect – and herein lies the real danger of honey – this is to short-circuit the system of wider solidarities and exchanges on which cultural life depends. Culture crucially *depends* upon periodic gender segregation. As Lévi-Strauss (1973: 412) puts it – endorsing in this respect something like the origins model central to this book – ‘the power of nature conjoins the sexes to the detriment of culture’, whereas

the power of culture disjoins the sexes, to the detriment of nature which prescribes their union; temporarily at least, family links are broken in order to allow human society to be formed.

If the ‘honey’ myths express concern over cultural collapse, it is because

in native thought, the search for honey represents a kind of return to nature, imbued with an erotic appeal transposed from the sexual to the gustatory register, and which would sap the very foundations of culture if it lasted too long. Similarly, the custom of the honeymoon would be a threat to public order if husband and wife were allowed to enjoy each other indefinitely and to neglect their duties towards society. (1978: 413)

The final sections of *From Honey to Ashes* are about ‘instruments of darkness’ designed to counteract risks of this kind. They do this by making loud

noises, interrupting love-making and keeping the sexes apart at least for certain periods of time.

### Din and Stench

The themes brought together in Lévi-Strauss' chapter of this title (1973: 361–422) include:

- discontinuous noises designed to disjoin the sexes;
- the rattles, clappers and other instruments which make such noises, for example the Bororo *parabára*;
- the extinguishing of all lights and fires;
- the stench of 'the rotten world';
- the 'long night';
- menstrual blood.

The connections are suggested already in a passage by Lévi-Strauss (1973: 373) early on in this chapter. The Tucuna Indians, one of whose myths put him on the track of the Bororo *parabára*, 'knock sticks together in one set of circumstances at least':

It is well known that these Indians attach great importance to the puberty rites for girls. As soon as a girl detects signs of her first period, she takes off all her ornaments, hangs them in an obvious place on the posts of her hut and goes off to hide in a nearby bush. When her mother arrives, she sees the ornaments, realizes what has happened and sets off to look for her daughter. The latter replies to her mother's calls by striking two pieces of dry wood together. The mother then loses no time in erecting a partition around the young girl's bed and takes her there after nightfall.

The clapping noise made when two sticks are knocked together – perhaps the most simple conceivable use by a girl of her 'instruments of darkness' – is triggered, in other words, *by the onset of menstruation*. It leads to the erection of a partition for the young woman's seclusion. It is as if discontinuous noises were the acoustic mode of existence of the menstrual flow, generating *disjunction* in the same way.

Lévi-Strauss goes on to discuss the 'instruments of darkness' used in Europe from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. These were hammers, hand-rattles, clappers, castanets and similar instruments which replaced the chiming of church bells for one short period in every year – for the three days, from Thursday to Saturday, before Easter Sunday in Holy Week. Three days is, of course, at least conventionally and symbolically, the duration of the temporary 'death' of the moon – and therefore by association of a menstruating wife with respect to her husband. In the case we are discussing,

however, the 'temporary death' which is marked and respected is that not of a lunar deity or menstruating woman – but of Christ. Lévi-Strauss (1973: 405) suggests that 'the instruments of darkness may have been intended to represent the marvels and terrifying noises which occurred at the time of the death of Christ'. In Corsica, various percussive devices were used: the beating of the altar and benches in churches, the smashing of planks with clubs and the use of hand-knockers, clappers and hand rattles of various types. In France, metal pots and pans were beaten, and wooden clogs were used to hammer the ground. The Church itself seems to have been generally opposed to such noise-making activities, and tried to restrict them. Lévi-Strauss traces their use back to neolithic or even palaeolithic times.

The reasons for associating a magico-religious three-day period of 'darkness' and 'death' with 'the very wet' should need no elaboration, so it comes as no surprise to find that the period coincides with the ritual *extinguishing of all fires*. Just before Easter, in mediaeval Europe, all candles and fires were extinguished and then lit afresh on Easter Sunday, when the Lenten fast was also ended and church bells were permitted to ring out again (Lévi-Strauss 1973: 408). Something similar used to happen in China, as Lévi-Strauss (p. 406) shows by quoting a passage from Frazer (1926–36, 10: 137):

In China, every year about the beginning of April, certain officials called Sz'hüen used of old to go about the country armed with wooden clappers. Their business was to summon people and command them to put out every fire. This was the beginning of the season called Han-shih-tsieh, or 'eating cold food'. For three days all household fires remained extinct as a preparation for the solemn renewal of the fire, which took place on the fifth or sixth day after the winter solstice. The ceremony was performed with great pomp by the same officials who procured the new fire from heaven by reflecting the sun's rays either from a metal mirror or from a crystal on dry moss. . . .

This ritual was of great antiquity, dating in China from at least 2,000 years before Christ.

Apparently the aim of these practices, as of their worldwide variants, was to ensure (a) the complete *disjunction* of the polar opposite terms of which the universe is composed (earth and sunlight, meat and cooking-fire, wife and husband and so on) in order (b) to make their subsequent *conjunction* all the more emphatic and orderly.

Within this traditional paradigm, storms, thunder, noises of all kinds, blood-flows, rottenness and stench all combine to form a complex of signals performing the function of separators or punctuation marks. All means possible are brought into play to keep the sexes (often coded as earth and sky or sun, game animals and their hunters, raw flesh and cooking-fire) apart. It is as if men and women were disjoined by what stands furthest removed in the universe from fire: the flow of menstrual blood. This blood cannot, of

course, be 'heard'. But thunder-claps can be heard, as can their imitation using crashing sticks or clappers, and if the myths say that such things are caused by the spirits (such as monsters, or rainbow snakes) which simultaneously cause the menstrual flow, then conceptually it is *as if* the blood pulse itself could be heard. Thunder, lightning, storms and floods become transformations and amplifications of the simple colour symbolism of the menstrual flow. They are the blood signal translated into a variety of acoustic, meteorological and other codes.

In *The Raw and the Cooked*, Lévi-Strauss points out that in the myths concerning the origin of cooking-fire, this fire is treated as 'negative noise'. People who are cooking – or who are 'stealing' or carrying burning embers from which to make the world's first cooking-fire – must *turn a deaf ear to certain sounds* (in one instance to 'the call of rotten wood'). Lévi-Strauss (1970: 286) asks how we are to interpret 'the curious connection, which is common to all the versions, between the cooking of food and the attitude to noise?' In fact he never gives an explanation, but he discerns a logical pattern built around the following ideas:

1. Noises trigger the *disjunction* of marital partners;
2. Cooking-fire is associated with their *conjunction*;
3. Hence the success of cooking depends on the *avoidance of noise*.

In illustrating this pattern, he enters into a discussion of the institution known as the *charivari*.

The word 'charivari' refers to the derisive cacophony made at night in traditional European cultures by the community-wide banging of pans, cauldrons, basins and so on, in front of the houses of people suspected of love-making in 'scandalous' incestuous or other circumstances (Lévi-Strauss 1970: 287). Lévi-Strauss links this to the *din* traditionally made by people in many parts of the world at the time of an *eclipse*. A terrific cacophony of banging on various objects gave expression to people's hostility to the 'scandalous' intrusion of night into day, or of a shadow into the full moon when it ought to be clear. Very often, the belief is that a gigantic frog, wolf, dragon or other monster is about to devour the heavenly body. In the case of both 'reprehensible sexual unions' and the 'the excessive intimacy' of a monster in its relations with the moon or sun, the aim seems to be to make sufficient noise to *disjoin* the parties concerned. This is, in any event, the typical native explanation.

But Lévi-Strauss (1970: 295) makes a more subtle point. What is vital is that there should be a regular, predictable, periodic sequence of conjunctions and disjunctions between the polar terms (earth and sky, sun and moon, husbands and wives, cooking-fire and meat) making up the total system of human and cosmic life. The full moon should alternate regularly with the dark moon, just as day should alternate with night, and just as sexual conjunction (marriage) should alternate with disjunction (kinship). Should a

celestial 'monster' intervene in this process by plucking the full moon from the sky, there is then the danger of a gap opening up in the sequence, so that unless something is done, dark will alternate . . . with dark. Likewise, if marriage takes place when there ought to be kinship solidarity, the danger is of a similar breaking of the required predictable sequence. It is as if day were to be followed by day.

The *making of loud noises* is designed to prevent such conjunctions of phases which ought to be kept apart. It does this by 'filling in the gap' – putting something in where a void would otherwise open up. The loud noises, in short, do not simply keep apart partners – they are designed to keep apart *periods of time* which should not be conjoined.

This is demonstrated by customs which, to western readers, might seem nearer to home. Even where charivari is no longer practised, writes Lévi-Strauss (1970: 301),

noise up to a point retains its general function. In twentieth-century Europe, where scientific knowledge is so widespread, it is no longer conceivable that an eclipse should be greeted by noisemaking. Nevertheless the practice still survives in cases where there is a break, or a threatened break, in the cosmological sequence, but only when the interruption is considered as a social, and not a cosmic, event.

In Lithuania, where even up to the present century children were told to beat pans and other metal utensils with sticks in order to drive away evil spirits during eclipses, 'the spring festivities are still marked by a certain rowdyism'. On Good Friday, young Lithuanian men 'create a din by breaking furniture, such as tables, bedsteads. etc.' And in the past, it was customary in the same country *to break the furniture of deceased persons with a great deal of noise*. 'Customs such as these', comments Lévi-Strauss (1970: 301) after his survey,

are part of a universal system, unmistakable vestiges of which still survive in Western countries – for instance, the smashing of china and exploding of fireworks in Italy on New Year's Eve, and the chorus of automobile horns that ushers in the New Year in Times Square, Piccadilly Circus, and the Champs Elysées. . . .

The old year has to be extinguished in the most emphatic possible way to allow the new year to be born. At all costs, what must be avoided is any merging or confusion between the two.

### Silence at Full Moon

While incest, noise and eclipses imply 'anti-cooking', the converse also holds: marital sex, silence and the full moon imply the power and success of the cooking process. And these belong together in the same way. For example, when it is a question, not of charivari, but of endorsing and

sustaining a marital union which is approved, the rule of silence may be carried to considerable extremes:

In various regions of Australia, Oceania, and Africa, young married couples had to remain silent for a period of time varying from two months to a year, according to the locality. A similar custom has been observed in America, the Caucasus, and Sardinia. The ban on speech was usually lifted on the birth of the first child. (Lévi-Strauss 1970: 328)

Discussing the significance of this custom, Frazer (1910; 4: 236–7) concludes that the wife's silence until the birth of her first child 'rests on some superstitious belief touching her first pregnancy which as yet we do not understand'. Lévi-Strauss (1970: 328) comments that the question at issue 'is not pregnancy but birth'. And it is certainly the case that whereas menstrual bleeding implies the inverse of pregnancy and the inverse of birth – playing, between partners who are kin, the role of eclipses or storms 'incestuously' conjoining heaven and earth – the birth of a baby has the opposite effect. It 'plays, between husband and wife, a part similar to that played by cooking fire between sky and earth' (1970: 329).

Sky and earth are linked peacefully as husband and wife in periods when cooking fires are burning and the skies are bright. But they are conjoined 'noisily', 'riotously' and 'incestuously' during 'anti-cooking' periods such as eclipses, storms, moonless nights or floods. Eclipses, and the accompanying din, imply bloodshed. They are a threat to normal human births. By the same token, when the moon is reappearing after its monthly disappearance, its own 'rebirth' requires a cautious attitude to noise:

The silence that precedes the first birth could correspond to the old Lapp belief that the new moon and the aurora borealis must not be annoyed by any kind of noise. Conversely, in various American communities, eclipses that were marked by noisemaking were also the particular concern of pregnant women and young mothers. (Lévi-Strauss 1970: 329)

During an eclipse, the Micmac of eastern Canada made their women go outside the huts and take care of their children. At Jemez, a pueblo in New Mexico, it was believed that eclipses caused abortions, so pregnant women had to remain indoors or, if they were absolutely obliged to go out, they had to put on a key or an arrowhead in their girdles to prevent the moon from devouring the foetus or to keep the child from being afflicted with a harelip. 'Even today', continues Lévi-Strauss (1970: 329),

the Maya-speaking Pocomchi have the following rules which must be obeyed during an eclipse: 'First your head is covered. And if you are a (pregnant) girl or even a boy who has just married and has a wife, you should go into the house. . . . It is not good to observe the moon in its struggle.

Pregnant women keep silent because noise is associated with the flowing of genital blood – with abortions, miscarriages, menstruation and the ‘dying’ of the moon. To give birth is analogous to cooking. Normatively it should occur at full moon. It belongs, with cooking, to the period of the moon’s full and complete ‘rebirth’, when honeymoon fires are flickering, love-making is in progress and all is joyful, quiet and calm.

### One Myth Only

I have presented a distillation of the logic of *Mythologiques*, emphasising certain elements and playing down others in order to bring out for the reader – as briefly and simply as possible – the convergence between Lévi-Strauss’ findings and my own.

It is towards the end of the fourth volume – when Lévi-Strauss (1981: 561–624) is triumphantly demonstrating that his 800 or so stories are all versions of what he calls ‘One Myth Only’ – that the fit becomes detailed, unerring and explicit. The ‘bird-nester’ turns out to be among other things a ‘Naked Man’. He is ‘naked’ in exactly the same sense that a young girl in her menstrual seclusion is ‘naked’. He is ‘raw’, and often blood-stained like a baby. As if returning to the womb – or to the period of infancy before he was given a name – he has left behind the marks of his normal social identity. The stories often tell of him leaving his clothes behind as he begins his climb towards the sky – clothes which are then stolen by a rival. More than a mere change of apparel is signified here. All Lévi-Strauss’ North American bird-nester stories which centre on an ‘exchange of clothes’ are in fact depicting what in other myths is conceptualised as ‘skin-change’ – the exchange of one social identity for a different one, this in turn corresponding to a perpetual, pendulum-like oscillation between a person’s marital role and her or his role as ‘blood’ or kin.

Lest the reader should feel at this point that matters are getting somewhat complicated, let me stress once again the remarkable simplicity of the logic behind all such ideas. It is just that at full moon, one abandons one’s identity (one’s role, mask, ‘skin’, ‘clothes’ and so on) as ‘brother’ or ‘sister’, in order to assume that of ‘spouse’ or ‘lover’. At dark moon, one throws off one’s lover-identity once more and resumes the role of ‘blood’ relative or kinsperson. At each transition point one loses one kind of relative only to gain another, affines being exchanged for kin and kin for affines in regular succession. ‘Rivals’ are always involved, because (viewing matters from the standpoint of a male) when a wife is temporarily abandoned at dark moon, she is ‘taken back’ by her brother or other kin, while when a sister is abandoned at full moon, she is ‘taken back’ by her lover or husband. The ‘quarrel between antagonists’ in all these myths is, then, of the same order as the ‘quarrel’ between night and day, wet season and dry, dark moon and full. In such alternations, first one aspect ‘kills’ the other, then the ‘killed’ aspect

resurrects itself and 'kills' its 'opponent' – and so on. Winter reigns; summer is dead. But then summer regains the ascendancy and kills winter in turn, before the whole process repeats itself. At a deep level, the seemingly fraught, often frantic and typically bloody 'conflicts' between 'rivals' in these myths tell only of such patterns of alternation which are central to the experience of life in all its forms. Death, murder, incest, cannibalism, rape: these and similarly drastic deeds and events are memorable code terms whose function is to help fix in the collective mind the features of a logic of cultural metamorphosis modelled on the peaceful changes of women and the moon.

The final 'bird-nester' narrative to be presented in full – myth 793a in *The Naked Man* – 'mainly emphasizes the origin of monthly periods of which Moon Woman is the instigator' (1981: 574). It is in this Coos Indian story that the 'quintessential mythic formula' is claimed by Lévi-Strauss to have been at last extracted (1981: 564). The myth spotlights the bird-nester's climb in search of the brilliant red feathers of a woodpecker who is busy pecking at some 'blood-stained faeces' which have been placed at the summit of a tall tree (p. 564). Meanwhile, the climber's father-in-law, who has remained down on the ground, assumes the young man's appearance and takes possession of his wives. In the sky, the climber is threatened by a cannibalistic Sun Woman who has to be vanquished using an ice-cold penis, and marries two nocturnal, semi-aquatic women who regulate the synchrony of all other women's menstrual flows (1981: 564–5). Lévi-Strauss' four-volume work then culminates (1981: 598–601) in his analysis of an Ojibwa mythic pattern 'based on a conflict between the two moons' – a set of stories which combine motifs from the opening Bororo 'bird-nester' myth and motifs from the Plains Indian 'Wives of the Sun and Moon' narratives central to Volume 3. The 'two moons' are the heavenly body's dark and light, waning and waxing aspects whose life and death 'struggle' is depicted – in myth 810 (the last myth to be given in full) – with the help of an immense 'swing' oscillating to and fro between opposite worlds and also between a man's wife and his mother.

In the light of all this, one thing at least should be clear. At the core of American Indian mythology is the depiction of an endless movement – like that of a pendulum – between darkness and light, 'sky' and 'earth', kinship and marriage, 'blood' and 'fire'. Central to this in turn is an ancient sociologically and therefore mythologically necessary equation of cosmic darkness with the darkness and rawness of both female and animal flesh. Like Ifi Amadiume's Igbo python, a menstruant should always keep out of the sun. Such a woman should be not in 'this world' but in the darkness of 'the world beyond' – inviting cosmic disaster such as the collapse of the sky should her feet so much as touch the earth upon which ordinary people live their domestic, marital and other lives. In the 'other world' a menstruant is symbolically within the domain of all game – in fact, of all living creatures, to the extent that these are not yet cooked but still have life-blood in their

veins. Here, all intimacies are non-marital. As Lévi-Strauss (1978: 404) puts it:

a menstruating woman, who has to remain in temporary seclusion, keeps her husband *at a distance*, so that during this period, metaphorically at least, it is as if she had gone back to be near her own people.

'The occurrence of menstruation', Lévi-Strauss continues, 'revives a kind of right of repossession', as if blood kin were temporarily and repeatedly seizing back the woman whom in marriage they had 'given away'. It is not difficult to appreciate how, given the synchronisation of women's periods, the forces exercising these 'rights of marital repossession' might have assumed quite imposing collective proportions and forms. And then, wherever or whenever such synchronisation could be broken down, enabling men to exercise more stable and permanent marital rights in their wives, it is not difficult to appreciate how, in cultures stretching to the outermost corners of the globe, this severing of women's periodic links with 'heaven' or 'the skies' came to be conceptualised as the dismemberment of a 'winged serpent' or woman-seizing 'dragon' by some patriarchal hero who established the present permanence of marriage and order of the world (cf. Fontenrose 1959).

In any event, Woman's blood – its logic identical to that of the great pythons and dragons encountered earlier – in effect 'carries her away'. In this context, according to Lévi-Strauss (1978: 400), a husband unavoidably 'recognises that a wife is never given without some hope of return: each month, during the space of a few days, menstruation deprives the husband of his wife, as if her relatives were reasserting their rights over her'.

During her seclusion a woman is – symbolically – reclaimed if not by a 'dragon' then at least by her *male and female kin*. In this kinship/menstrual role, the woman is 'dead' to her marital life; her husband is therefore 'a widower' (Lévi-Strauss: 1978: 404). Since her kin included her forebears, she is moreover *conjoined with the spirits of the dead*, who – in accordance with the by-now familiar conceptual merging of ancestral blood with the blood of wild animals – may be confused or identified in turn with '*animal husbands*'. All 'kin' – living or dead, animal or human – are now as if swallowed up by the blood which unites them as 'one flesh'. All of this signifies 'incest' in the sense of *a conjunction between those of the same blood*. Yet the logic stipulates that there is nothing wrong with this 'incest' – which is in fact perfectly normal – provided it occurs *at the right time*. Unity between those of the 'same blood' is only indisputably and unambiguously wrong when it occurs *out of phase*.

Christian mythology, as we noted earlier, places Christ, on whose blood the salvation of humanity depends, into the realm of death for three days in every year, and less emphatically once a week on Fridays, when (until recently) Catholics were obliged – as on Good Friday itself – to respect the flesh of their Saviour by abstaining from the consumption of all meat. Traditional ritualism all over the world places menstruating women in the

same realm of temporary death – marked in particular by meat avoidances as well as various other forms of abstinence – for three days in every month. The sounds of the ‘instruments of darkness’ through which Christ’s death was once marked are associated inevitably with the realm of decayed and decaying flesh – the ‘rotten world’. And the instruments which produce such sounds, like the menstrual flow itself, are conceptualised as emerging from that realm which stands on ‘the other side’ of life. They come from within ancestral women’s wombs, or from within the belly of a monster, or from deep marshes or bogs; and when they are retrieved or first discovered, they are covered in foul-smelling fluids, grease mixed with red ochre or perhaps thick mud. Lévi-Strauss (1973; 414–15) gives an example:

Let us take the case of the Bororo. They have an instrument of darkness, the parabára, and they also possess the bull-roarer. There is no doubt at all that the latter connotes the rotten world. The bull-roarer, which the Bororo call aigé, mimics the cry of a monster of the same name which is supposed to live in rivers and marshlands. The animal appears in certain rites, in the form of a dancer who is encased in mud from head to foot. The future priest learns of his vocation during a dream in which the aigé embraces him, without his experiencing fear or revulsion either at the monster’s smell or at the stench of decayed corpses.

Here, then, as in Northern Australia, a man acquires power through his ‘temporary death’, when he is embraced by an immense water-monster whose noisy presence is mimicked in the bull-roarer’s throbbing sound.

### Sounds, Smells – and Blood

Still, however, the reader may be wondering quite why the transition point at dark moon – when a woman abandons her lover to regain her kin – should be marked by the bull-roarer’s (or other instrument’s) *noise*. Since the aim here is to demonstrate the identity between Lévi-Strauss’ findings and my own in connection with dragon legends in general and the Rainbow Snake in particular, let me return at this point briefly to Australia; it is here that our information on the subject of bull-roarers is most complete.

In a review of Buchler’s (1978) structuralist analysis of the Rainbow Snake complex, Kolig (1981) criticises the author’s view that ‘the Snake’ is essentially conjured up by female *smells*. Kolig (1981: 316) cites a Western Australian myth about a Rainbow Snake known as *Nginin*:

two white men noisily ferried down the Fitzroy River in a dinghy, shooting at crocodiles all the while. Enraged by the noise Nginin hooked the boat, hoisted it downriver and drowned the noisy group.

Kolig comments that this story ‘rather flatly rebuts Buchler’s thesis on the olfactory excellence of the Rainbow Serpent and his antagonism to foul odours’. True, concedes Kolig, the dancing, singing and chanting Wawilak

Sisters were swallowed because of their [menstrual] smells. But, he implies, they might just as well have been swallowed for making such a noise. – Buchler's concentration on their smells is one-sided and misleading. If the object is to arouse a Rainbow Snake, smells are not necessary – loud noises work just as well.

Kolig has a point, but it is stretching matters to think of it as 'flatly rebutting' Buchler. It has here been shown that noise, menstrual odours, 'excessive' maternity and many other factors are all possible ways of bringing on the 'anger' of the Rainbow Snake (Chapter 13). Aboriginal myth-makers and narrators have much freedom of choice here. Buchler and other structuralist interpreters are right, however, to see in all this a definite system, in which not everything is allowed, but only some things. The Snake, we have seen, is that force which makes its presence felt, within the model's terms, at the transition point of dark moon, when women as menstruants should be at the height of their sex-strike powers. The Snake extinguishes domestic fire, aborts the cooking process, interrupts marital relations. Wherever it is being aroused, the basic uniformity is that one or several of the linked elements of wetness, flood, storm, thunderous noise, bloodshed, rawness, darkness, menstrual odour, blood-to-blood intimacy and human-with-animal conjunction must be present. The converse of these – dryness, fire, silence, light, cooking, feasting, marital sex and the separation of human from animal forms of life – will be either absent or suppressed. This is an absolute uniformity. There would appear to be no exceptions to these rules.

I have just shown that precisely such a pattern constitutes the essence of the findings of Lévi-Strauss in his *Mythologiques*. If loud noises are made, blood pollution is assumed to be present, and the cooking process is assumed to be threatened or even thrown into reverse. Linked to 'din', as we have seen, is 'stench'. Linked to these in turn we find 'incest' – in particular, the 'excessive' closeness of boys to their mother, or mothers to their own noisy offspring. Linked again with all this we find eclipses or periods of terrifying darkness, including storms. Eclipses are in turn greeted with loud noises – just as in many parts of the world, similar sounds are the appropriate response to unions deemed by the community to be 'incestuous'.

All this seems so totally anomalous within the normal paradigms of social anthropology as to have been successfully ignored until Lévi-Strauss drew such patterns to our attention. Structuralism has uncovered the structures, but it has still left us wondering how and why they came to evolve. There would seem to be no functionalist way of explaining why cooking should be thought incompatible with noise. Neither would it seem that sociobiology can provide an answer. The one dimension which these various contemporary approaches exclude with unanimity is history; it is here that the only possible answers lie. Magico-religious mythology is exceedingly conservative. 'In the life of a society', as the archaeologist Leroi-Gourhan (1968: 48) puts it, 'models of weapons change very often, models of tools less often, and social

institutions seldom, while religious institutions continue unchanged for millennia'. We have no reason to doubt that at the deepest structural level, magico-religious myths perpetuate patterns which are as old as human culture itself. It is not inconceivable, then, that they can tell us something about how culture came to exist. In this context, the anomalies surveyed in this chapter are precisely what we would expect. Women once signalled 'no' in their own blood. When they were on sex strike, they were on cooking strike, too. The blood-triggered 'no' was the basic signal generative of culture, and it was always switched either 'on' or 'off'. No additional signal could be allowed to interfere with this one; if the blood signal was augmented by an auditory accompaniment, it could only be *within* the terms of the semantic field established already by 'the language of blood'. At the simplest conceivable level, an auditory signalling system would consist merely of the *presence or absence of noise of any kind*. So it is clear when the noise signal would have had to be *present*. If the blood signal was switched 'on', this had to apply equally to the noise signal. The role of noise was merely to augment – not conflict with – the primary signal of blood.

Women declared their sex strike/cooking strike to be 'on' by bleeding as visibly as possible – and simultaneously by making whatever loud noises their technology made possible or appropriate for them. Such marriage-rupturing, tryst-interrupting, tension-inducing noises produced, in effect, the 'sound' of the blood. Aboriginal Australians know this: they know that the bull-roarer's sound *is* the sound of their ancestral 'Mother's' blood. Hence in a variant on the Wawilak Sisters myth, from the Ma:ra tribal group on the southern banks of the Roper River, the ogress and all-Mother Mumuna is eventually killed by men who – in the usual way – extract from this representative of Womankind the secrets of their own ritual power:

As Mumuna died, she called out *brr!* and that sound went into every tree; her blood splashed on to every tree, and it was that blood that contained the sound.

Afterwards, in memory of Mumuna, the Eaglehawk cut down a big tree, and from its wood he made a bullroarer which is the Mumuna (or Mumunga). He tried to get the sound of the dying woman. As he swung it, it 'turned into a *mumuna*'; and its sound was the sound contained in the wood of the tree, which had in it the Mumuna's blood. (Berndt 1951: 151–2)

All over Aboriginal Australia, the sound of the bull-roarer is in effect the sound of the ancestral Mother's blood. That explains why the instruments are sounded only on very special occasions – *whenever ancestral blood is flowing*. It also explains why the instruments and their strings are repeatedly rubbed, before each ritual use, with 'ancestral' blood and/or red ochre, usually mixed with an ample supply of grease. The throbbing roar is to replicate and forever to perpetuate the signal through which culture itself was conjured into being.

As long as the blood spell lasts, so does the sound, or the possibility of sound. Only when the moon is full – to keep to the model's terms – does marital sex occur. Only then are the cooking-fires lit. Only then is the period of noise replaced by that of silence or auditory calm. Full moon, light, marital sex, cooking and quietness thus all fall together within one and the same segment of lunar time. Dark moon, darkness, blood-intimacy, rawness and noise all fall together in the opposite segment for exactly the same set of reasons.

### The Harmony of the Spheres

This book began by arguing that a model of human cultural origins should be testable in relation to the symbolic levels of the relevant archaeological and ethnographic evidence. In Chapter 2, Lévi-Strauss' work on mythology was discussed, and I observed that it would be a point in its favour if a modern origins narrative could explain some of the more unexpected and seemingly bizarre findings made in this vast cross-cultural work. By such a standard, the model presented here seems a strong one.

To anyone who has studied Lévi-Strauss' *Mythologiques* with the thoroughness it deserves, it is clear beyond doubt that the myths of the Americas are all of one piece – facets of a single crystalline object as solid as rock ('of the nature of a thing among things': Lévi-Strauss 1970: 10). In this book I have suggested that the same almost certainly applies to Aboriginal Australian mythology, although – despite the achievements of Kenneth Maddock (1974; 1978a, 1978b: 1985) and a few others in this respect – at present the work of extending Lévi-Strauss' project to this continent has scarcely begun. Even on the basis of the results already achieved, however, it is clear that the Australian myths, no less than the Amerindian ones, are yielding fragments of what is revealing itself to be an unchanging, solid and worldwide 'thing'. But this 'thing' emerges not simply or directly as a reflection of the neurological connections in the human brain. It pertains not only to the mind – but to the body, too. And it is not only, or even primarily, male. It is at least equally female. If the myths and practices we have examined turn out to display one and the same inner logic, it is not because they are constrained by certain mysterious genetically fixed properties of the human intellect. It is because they are transformations worked upon what is invariably one and the same initial paradigm of menstrual solidarity and power.

Lévi-Strauss probably would not endorse the central argument of this book. Nonetheless, his strange cosmological and other findings can be accounted for by the model, whilst they are not explained at all by the patriarchal origins theory which he first put forward in *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* (1969a). Indeed, as one pores over the initially baffling details of *Mythologiques*, the diligent reader becomes increasingly impressed with the extent to which Lévi-Strauss' strange methodology by some

unknown mechanism came to facilitate the partial, halting reconstruction of an archaic native paradigm which contradicts Lévi-Strauss' own sexual-political assumptions at almost every point.

It becomes almost exasperating, sometimes, to see how close Lévi-Strauss came to the simple logic he was searching for. Again and again, the materials he marshals and even his own insights point to a set of links between lunar periodicity, menstruation, blood, cooking and marriage rules such as this book has outlined. Almost all of the jigsaw pieces assembled and arranged in this book are items isolated by Lévi-Strauss, and published – from the 1960s onwards – for the academic world to make some kind of sense out of them. Yet the pieces were scrambled so effectively that the four volumes of *Mythologiques*, when they were finally completed, seemed to most readers indecipherable. The dark moon, the full moon; women as menstruants, women as wives; noise, silence; raw meat, cooked – all these logical pairs, along with many others, were painstakingly isolated by Lévi-Strauss, and shown to be the basic conceptual building-blocks of what was revealing itself as the remnants of an awe-inspiring archaic pan-American scientific paradigm. But the paradigm as reconstituted in *Mythologiques* unfortunately does not make sense. No society could ever actually work on the basis of the rules and regulations that Lévi-Strauss suggests. The bizarre composite image he eventually gives us equally relates to nothing very meaningful in our own culture – and perhaps partly for that very reason connotes little which has excited students of history or ethnography either. The *substantive findings* of *Mythologiques* – the transcontinental incompatibility of 'noise' and 'cooking-fire', for example – have not been taken up even by many mythographers or social anthropologists, let alone by evolutionary biologists or palaeoanthropologists. It would only have taken a few fairly simple changes to have made the model seem interesting and workable. But these would have involved turning Lévi-Strauss' own deepest personal myth – his 'exchange of women' model – on its head. Despite the immense force of the native logic which often pushed him far in this direction, in the end the founder of structuralism succeeded in holding the line. Comprehension was finally renounced.

The scale of Lévi-Strauss' achievement cannot be overestimated. In his own way, he (1978: 221–2) confirms that the many hundreds of myths analysed in his vast compilation are all, in the final analysis, variations on the 'Rule of Women' theme. As he puts it: 'the veil lifts to reveal a vast mythological system common to both South and North America, and in which the subjection of women is the basis of the social order. We can now understand the reason for this.'

And what is this reason why women must be 'subjected'? Once again, Lévi-Strauss refers us to menstruation. So powerful are women's flows, and so demanding of cosmic synchrony, that unless carefully controlled they could throw the whole universe into chaos. As Lévi-Strauss (1978: 506) puts it, having touched on the dangers of cycles which are 'too slow' or 'too fast':

The reason why women are most in need of education is that they are periodic creatures. Because of this, they are perpetually threatened – and the whole world with and through them – by the two possibilities that have just been mentioned: their periodic rhythm could slow down and halt the flow of events, or it could accelerate and plunge the world into chaos. It is equally conceivable that women might cease to menstruate and bear children, or that they might bleed continuously and give birth haphazardly. But in either case, the sun and the moon, the heavenly bodies governing the alternation of day and night and of the seasons, would no longer be able to fulfil their function.

Earliest Womankind, the myths allege, simply could not be trusted to menstruate or give birth on time. 'In her pristine innocence, she did not have monthly periods and gave birth suddenly and without warning.' This – according to Lévi-Strauss – was a denial of culture:

The transition from nature to culture demands that the feminine organism should become periodic, since the social as well as the cosmic order would be endangered by a state of anarchy in which regular alternation of day and night, the phases of the moon, feminine menstruation, the fixed period for pregnancy and the course of the seasons did not mutually support one another.

Lévi-Strauss (1978: 222) continues:

So it is as periodic creatures that women are in danger of disrupting the orderly working of the universe. Their social insubordination, often referred to in the myths, is an anticipation in the form of the 'reign of women' of the infinitely more serious danger of their physiological insubordination. Therefore, women have to be subjected to *règles*. And the rules instilled into them by their upbringing, like those imposed on them, even at the cost of their subjection, by a social order willed and evolved by men, are the pledge and symbol of other 'rules', the physiological nature of which bears witness to the correspondence between social and cosmic rhythms.

But it is in this last passage that Lévi-Strauss' sexual-political interpretation departs most starkly from my own. Lévi-Strauss takes chaos as the initial situation which prevailed before male power succeeded in establishing culture. He suggests – or at least allows his Amerindian myth-makers to suggest – that harmony and order were created only when men succeeded in prioritising marriage bonds as the basic building-blocks of the cultural domain, a theory discussed in some detail in Chapter 2. In this book, on the contrary, I have argued that male 'order' embodies no special creativity. Men invented none of the basic principles of kinship, ritual action or cosmological belief which have here been examined. At best, masculinist ritual activity

and its associated mythology represents only a politically distorted imprint made from a pre-existent template. It becomes established only through the replacement of its female counterpart, its condition being the collapse of synchrony and harmony between women's menstrual rhythms and the cyclicity of the moon. In place of periodic 'honeymoon' (Lévi-Strauss 1973: 157, 283), male sexual-political hegemony turns marriage into a fixed and permanent bond, devoid of periodicity or scope for renewal. 'The Dragon's' or 'Snake's' periodic hold over Womankind is finally broken, the 'Powers of Darkness' are vanquished – and the world is made safe for patriarchal marriage and family life.

Far from producing culture, as Lévi-Strauss' mythological narrative would have it, male power enters tardily on to the scene, transforming and politically colonising a cultural landscape long since formed by others. Far from enhancing menstrual periodicity in women, it acts as the agency of its suppression as a creative cultural force. Yet tradition holds that without women's bloody periodic rupturing of all marital ties, all order, harmony, balance and renewal in the universe would be in danger of becoming lost. The world, fixed in permanent marriage, might then become fixed, correspondingly, in only one cyclical cosmic phase – in permanent dry season, permanent senility, or permanent day. To avoid this – to bring on night's healing darkness, to invite storms, thunder and the annual rains, to welcome death from which new life must flow – ritual therefore seeks to make amends, preserving the forms of menstrual synchrony and alternation even as the menstrual potency of real women is devalued and denied.

At the root of all ritual in traditional cultures is the notion of harmony. 'Harmony' and 'synchrony' in this context are interchangeable terms. The Karadjeri in western Australia let flow their own blood in the confident belief that this fertilises the local parrot-fish – all hunting and gathering success depending as it does upon the 'harmonizing of natural and social rhythms' (Maddock 1974: 134). Likewise, the Amazonian Barasana who practise *He House* – their version of male menstrual rain-making – do so whenever they fear human society to be 'in danger of becoming separated from, and out of phase with, its generative source' (Hugh-Jones, S. 1979: 249).

It is fitting that the myths accompanying such rituals should so insistently depict their yearned-for synchrony as emanating in some way from ancestral women's wombs (Chapters 12 and 13). This book has shown that such beliefs are in essence good science. As they harmonised their rhythms with those of the world around them, earliest cultural women must have felt the power in their own bodies to be intimately connected with all wider processes of cyclical renewal. It was almost as if their blood – source of all life – made the rains fall, the seasons change, the game animals reproduce and multiply. It would have been logical to feel this – if it really were women's sexual-political combined action which kept the social world so successfully turning in sympathy with wider ecological rhythms. When synchrony with the moon

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and tides was properly established, social life was successful, adaptation to nature's demands was appropriate, and therefore it seemed that the wind, the rain, the earth, the sky and all of nature was supportive of human life. In this context, we can perhaps imagine the sense of cosmic strength conveyed as women identified their own inner forces with the turning of the moon, with the success of men's hunting efforts, with their own gathering and child-bearing productivities, with the tides, seasons and other manifestations of cyclical change – and in tropical regions with the awesome force of lightning, thunder and the onset of monsoonal rains.

## Chapter 15

# Becoming Human

All social life is essentially *practical*. All the mysteries which lead theory towards mysticism find their rational solution in human practice and in the comprehension of this practice.

Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Theses on Feuerbach* (1845)

Marx argued that social science could be true to itself only when based on the interests of the working class. This work has been conceived and written in an explicitly Marxist mould, and this could lead to the suggestion that I, too, have produced a model which is politically biased.

My model suggests, however, that culture itself emerged from a comparable bias, having been based on the interests of the most reproductively burdened, materially productive sex.

I would not accept that this makes either Marx's or my own model politically suspect. The only 'bias', as far as I am concerned, is a bias against bias itself. The interests of mothers and their offspring may well have conflicted, prior to the emergence of culture, with male interests. But male dominance had to be overthrown because the unending prioritising of male short-term sexual interests could lead only to the permanence and institutionalisation of behavioural conflict between the sexes, between the generations and also between rival males. If the symbolic, cultural domain was to emerge, what was needed was a political collectivity – an alliance – capable of transcending such conflicts. The overcoming of sexist bias – the establishment between the genders of rational, shared, universally communicable understandings such as those central to human language – presupposed the breaking of male power prerogatives and the establishment of behavioural norms rooted within the domain of general rather than particularistic interests. Only the consistent defence and self-defence of mothers with their offspring could produce a collectivity embodying interests of a sufficiently broad, universalistic kind.

My model suggests that the defence of maternal interests was to the origins of human cultural awareness what the defence of working-class

interests was within the project of Marx and Engels, as they fought to establish a science of society which was genuinely free from bias. An implication would be that the first paradigms encoding human cultural knowledge were indeed 'scientific' in that Marxist political sense. They involved the translation of empowering information into universally communicable – rather than merely privatised or sectional – symbolic forms. I have argued in this book that the underlying structures of traditional magico-religious mythology indeed refer us back to those earliest dialectical, revolutionary, world-creating forms of science.

My view of science is not an uninhibitedly social or constructionist one. Although in the Introduction I invited the reader to join with me in exploring my own personal origins myth, I am not one of those who would deny that any meaningful distinction can be drawn between mythology and science. A construct can start out as science, only to become gradually mythologised. Alternatively, one which begins life as a myth can – through collective evaluation, correction and corroboration – turn out to be genuine science.

I am aware that there are Marxist-influenced scholars who *would* construe all human knowledge – including scientific knowledge – as conventional: as 'constructed' rather than 'discovered' (Latour and Woolgar 1979). But an extreme interpretation along these lines, as Donna Haraway (1989: 12) points out, would reduce the sciences to a cynical relativism with no standards beyond arbitrary power. It would imply that there is no world for which we are struggling to give an account, no referent in the system of signs of which each scientific discipline is composed, no hope for such a thing as progress in building better accounts of reality as the generations pass. There would be just political power and its associated myths. When a new paradigm came to prevail (Kuhn 1970), it would not be because it was 'better', or closer to 'the truth'. It would just mean that some new myth-weaving group had succeeded in establishing its dominance for a while.

My understanding of Marxism is more orthodox than this. It holds that although all knowledge *is* socially constructed, science and myth are nonetheless distinct *kinds* of construct. According to Marx, 'the *development of science . . . is only one aspect, one form in which the development of the productive forces, i.e. of wealth, appears*' (1973 [1859]: 540–1). This formulation links science with technology, industry and labour. Science becomes just one aspect of the relationship which exists between us, the human species, and the material universe (including our own products) in which we live. This relationship is a practical one. The process by which we acquire knowledge is also a process in which we acquire power – power to channel and to harness natural forces, and power to control those social forces which we as a species have unconsciously created ourselves. 'Science', as an

authoritative Marxist nicely put it, 'is knowledge which endows us with power' (Trotsky 1964 [1940]: 344).

According to this reading, scientific revolutions (Kuhn 1970) move knowledge in one direction rather than in the opposite one – in the long run always towards accounts which are objectively 'better' – because humanity's power in relation to its own products and environment is itself an objective phenomenon. When one paradigm replaces another, the conflict between the respective 'scientific communities' reflects a deeper conflict between social and political forces in the wider world. If science eventually wins out over myth – if each new paradigm is objectively closer to 'the truth' than the old – this is because social revolutions themselves are ultimately empowering processes, the classes or forces championing them unerringly choosing information forms which are widely empowering over those which empower only minority groups.

Such a reading would hold that *all* collective mental constructs express relationships of power. The constructs of the natural sciences arise out of humanity's growing power to harness the forces of the world around us. Astronomy made possible the earliest calendars, predictions of eclipses, accurate marine navigation and so on. The development of medical science permitted a measure of freedom from and conquest of disease. The modern advances of physics, chemistry, information technology and the natural sciences generally have today given us collectively an immense power to harness natural forces of all kinds and have utterly transformed the world in which we live.

In this perspective, anything that enhances *our* power – the survival capabilities of the human species as a whole at this stage of our evolution on this planet – can be termed 'science'; any human construct that denies us power, or restricts power only to some sectional interest or ruling élite, is 'ideology' or 'myth'. Of course, most constructs – much of the detailed narrative content of the present book no doubt included – are a bit of both, and as I have just suggested, today's science can very easily become tomorrow's myth. This is a slow, inexorable process of gradual inversion which seems to have given rise to all the more baffling forms of mythology that now exist in the world – from twentieth-century Stalinist and other pseudo-Marxist demonology on the one hand, to so-called 'primitive' mythology on the other. In this context, it certainly does become difficult to disentangle science from mythology, for as Donna Haraway (1989) has shown, even genuine natural science itself, although intrinsically international and of value to the species as a whole, has necessarily been stamped with the birthmark of its development within a politically structured, divided world. Primatology and palaeoanthropology in particular have been so charged with political significance as to have been quite unable to avoid being torn between claims as divergent as the long-term requirements of the human species as such on the one hand, and the felt needs of particular

social, racial, gender or otherwise *sectional* interests on the other.

But regardless of the precise proportions of 'myth' to 'science' in any one narrative, it is the extent of the *internationalism* of any construct – the global, species-wide range of the human power it can convey – which gives it whatever scientific status it can ultimately lay claim to. Deference to local religious or other susceptibilities immediately erects barriers to such 'free trade'. 'Must philosophy', as the young Marx (1957: [1842]: 21) once asked,

adopt different principles for every country, according to the saying 'different countries, different customs,' in order not to contradict the basic truths of dogma? Must it believe in one country that  $3 \times 1 = 1$ , in another that women have no soul and in yet another that beer is drunk in heaven? Is there not a *universal human* nature just as there is a universal nature of plants and heavenly bodies?

In stressing that philosophy's truths 'do not know the boundaries of political geography' (1957 [1842]: 26), Marx was simply saying that to the extent that science deserves to be called such, it conveys *distributable, internationally sharable* power. Most of physics, chemistry, astronomy and natural science generally *does* (at least potentially) impart this kind of power, recognising no political frontiers whatsoever – and it is *this* which underlies the ability of paradigm-sharing scientists across the planet to agree with one another in developing their sign systems. It is this scope of agreement in turn which distinguishes science at even the most superficial level from mere local, national or narrowly based (religious, political and so on) forms of consciousness, whose conflict-ridden sign systems are endlessly self-contradictory and incommensurable one with another.

### The Conditions of Scientific Objectivity

Marx's general formulation on the relationship between power and knowledge is well known:

The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas: i.e. the class, which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force. . . . The ruling ideas are nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material relationships, the dominant material relationships grasped as ideas, hence of the relationships which make one class the ruling one, therefore the ideas of its dominance. (Marx and Engels 1947 [1846]: 39)

Although I would emphatically extend Marx's argument to include 'gender' every bit as much as 'class', such a formulation has in my view never been bettered. It is not possible to change the prevailing ideas of society – or to produce a universally agreed upon basis for a science of society – without breaking the *material* power of those forces which distort science. The

convolutions and contradictions of patriarchal, sexist ideology – to take an example of obvious centrality to this book – cannot be sorted out exclusively through thought. Overcoming such mythology presupposes resisting the *physical* dominance of those masculinist institutions upon which the myth system relies, and without which it would collapse overnight. This is a task which requires the oppressed sex to resort to political – including possibly physical – action. Only when the two sexes can communicate in the absence of one-sided violence or power privileges which exempt men from having to *think at all* in relation to vast areas of sexual, personal and family life – only then will sanity and objectivity in cross-gender communication systems have some chance of arising. Although Marx was thinking in terms more of class than of gender, the same logic of course applies.

It was because Marx saw social contradictions as the source of mythological and ideological contradictions that he was able to insist that *only the removal of the social contradictions themselves could remove their expressions in ideology and science*. This is what Marx meant when he wrote:

The resolution of *theoretical* contradictions is possible only through *practical* means, only through the practical energy of man. Their resolution is by no means, therefore, the task only of understanding, but is a *real* task of life, a task which *philosophy* was unable to accomplish precisely because it saw there a *purely* theoretical problem. (1963a [1844]: 87)

But Marx at no time advocated tailoring knowledge to suit the felt needs of any sectional interest. The working class was not exempt from this. As Marx himself wrote:

It is not a matter of knowing what this or that proletariat, or even the proletariat as a whole, *conceives* as its aims at any particular moment. It is a question of knowing *what* the proletariat *is*, and what it must historically accomplish in accordance with its *nature*. (Marx and Engels 1963 [1845]: 237–8)

For Marx, to know 'what the proletariat *is*' constituted a *scientific* question, which could only be given a *scientific* answer in complete independence of any immediate political pressures or concerns. Far from arguing for the subordination of science to politics, Marx insisted on the subordination of politics to science.

Engels (1957 [1888]: 266) wrote: 'the more ruthlessly and disinterestedly science proceeds the more it finds itself in harmony with the interests of the workers'. There can be no doubt but that this accurately expressed Marx's own view. 'Who', the young Marx asked, 'should decide on the bounds of scientific research if not scientific research itself?' (1957 [1842]: 21). Science, as humanity's only universal, international, species-unifying form of knowledge, had to come first. No concessions to political pressure could be allowed. If the maintenance of scientific integrity nonetheless drew strength,

according to Marx and Engels, from reliance on *the international working class*, this was only in the sense that both thinkers recognised (a) that all knowledge must be rooted within some social constituency in order to exist at all whilst (b) the wider, the more universalistic and the less subject to prejudice this constituency, the better. The wider and more open the constituency, the greater would be science's freedom to follow its autonomous goals regardless of the consequences.

Marx and Engels felt confident on this score because although workers and their struggles were to them real enough, *the international working class*, in their eyes, was not something which existed preformed and organised already, 'out there', independently of the existence of knowledge of it. It was not telling anyone what to think. It could not conceivably act as a constraint upon scientific thought – any more than 'International Womankind' could so act today. On the contrary, it was itself a scientific construct. It was only in internalising this construct – only in becoming *aware*, through science, of its own planet-changing potential – that *the international working class* could begin existing as an embodied, organised political force for the first time.

Marx and Engels believed that it was possible for there to come into existence a new, revolutionary anthropological science (which of course came to be known as 'Marxism') thanks to the emergence for the first time, and as a direct result of scientific development itself, of a kind of 'anti-class'. There had emerged

a class in civil society which is not a class of civil society, a class which is the dissolution of all classes, a sphere of society which has a universal character because its sufferings are universal, and which does not claim a *particular redress* because the wrong which is done to it is not a *particular wrong* but *wrong in general*. (Marx 1963b [1843–4]: 58)

Here was a social sphere 'which claimed no *traditional* status but only a *human* status', a sphere which was 'not opposed to particular consequences but is totally opposed to the assumptions of the . . . political system', a sphere, finally, which could not emancipate itself 'without emancipating itself from all these other spheres' since it was 'a *total loss* of humanity' which could only redeem itself 'by a *total redemption of humanity*' (Marx 1963b [1843–4]:58). 'Here', Engels (1957 [1888]: 266) was later to write – referring to the working class – 'there is no concern for careers, for profit-making, or for gracious patronage from above'. Only *here* could science be true to itself, for only here could research be conducted within social surroundings of a truly emancipating, universalising, kind – affording the potential to work for the unity of the species as a whole. Within this scheme of things there was no possibility of science being subordinated to a pre-existing political force. The political force was science's own and could not exist without it. The previously prevailing relationships between science and politics were reversed.

In short, from the standpoint of Marx and Engels it was *in order* to remain

true to the interests of science – *in order* to begin solving its internal theoretical contradictions – that they felt obliged, as scientists to identify with that *material* social force which promised to counteract the ‘extraneous interests’ distorting the objectivity of science, and to take up the leadership of this material force themselves. Their idea was not that science is inadequate, and that politics must replace it or be added to it. It was that science – when fearlessly true to itself – is intrinsically revolutionary, and that it must recognise no other politics than its own.

### Marxism and the Dragon

The ancient paradigms of culture-bearing humanity have come down to us in many forms. All of these are in origin woman-empowering, no matter how much they may have undergone patriarchal ideological reworkings and political inversions in the millennia since culture first came into being. The gender-empowering essence of the earliest forms of science can therefore be compared, in the light of my argument in this book, with the class-empowering essence of Marxism. Although in the short term seemingly ‘one-sided’, this essence has in fact nothing to do with political bias. Rather, it is only through the empowerment of the oppressed that the biases of ruling genders and classes can be overcome. It is only through such empowerment that wider, universalistic interests can be established in place of sectional ones, and that people’s collective consciousness of their own strength can be made more and more freely communicable, broadly representative and therefore non-partisan or ‘scientific’.

Among the many constructs through which the earliest science has come down to us is one with which the reader will by now be familiar – that of an immense, all-seeing, many-headed, winged, snake-like being or ‘dragon’, making its presence felt in a multitude of cross-cultural images of composite beings, ‘fabulous beasts’, ‘All-Mothers’ and other monsters.

Behind all these images is the awareness that early cultures possessed of their own power. The reason for the paradoxical, dialectical nature of the imagery is the all-embracing, cyclical, conflict-transcending nature of the power itself. As we have seen, the power was collective – and therefore many-headed. It was an immense alliance – and therefore stretched, snake-like, across the landscape. It was dependent on the periodic flowing of blood – and therefore seemed bloodthirsty in its appetites. It involved the harmonisation of menstruation with the periodicity of the moon – and so was experienced as cosmic, umbilical, birth-giving, astrological. Its potency was inseparable from the awesome symbolic potency of menstrual blood – which became encoded as the death-dealing snake venom or poisonous dragon breath emanating from its being. Its rhythm was that of perpetual cyclical alternation between opposite light and dark, marital and kinship, cooked and raw, fire and blood phases or states – and therefore became codified as a

rainbow-like, betwixt-and-between entity in which all conceivable opposites were combined.

The science at the root of such images is that which Lévi-Strauss was the first to describe with relative accuracy in his *Mythologiques*. It is not always immediately apparent that it is 'science'. For example, of what conceivable *scientific* value could be the belief, central to all four volumes of *Mythologiques*, that good cooking is ruined by the making of *noise*? Is there anything in functionalism which might explain this? Or in sociobiology?

This notion seems incomprehensible – until it is realised that noise goes with eclipses, with the *dark* moon, and therefore with that time of month when menstrual blood should be flowing and cooking should not be happening at all. *Why* does noise-making accompany eclipses or connote the darkness of the moon? This is merely one of the emergent properties – a logical outcome – of the model. In the initial situation, the blood signal is either 'on' or 'off', and any accompanying signals – such as auditory ones – must be 'on' or 'off' in sympathy, so as to harmonise rather than interfere with the basic rhythmic blood signal (see above, pp. 506–08). When women declared themselves on sex strike, they must have used sound-making instruments to mark this fact, augmenting through loud noises the visual impact of their blood. It is this which ultimately explains why bull-roarers – always said to have been obtained from ancestral menstruating women – are heard throbbing throughout Aboriginal Australia at moments when ancestral blood is flowing.

Humans first became scientific – first learned to share their experiential and other findings so as to compare notes and subject them to collective scrutiny and evaluation – thanks to their discovery of what solidarity can mean. Their science, like ours, was essentially their *consciousness of their own collective strength*. This consciousness could become encoded in shared symbols – 'the Dragon' pre-eminent among them – because understandings themselves could be widely shared. Basic power inequalities and political conflicts – had these existed – would have obstructed such sharing and therefore distorted the objectivity of science. Thanks to the manner in which the human revolution had been achieved, such inequalities and conflicts were not basic to the alliances within which culture evolved. The very earliest cultures therefore had no need for religious myths. Although there was plenty of room for *magic* – for an awareness of the world-changing potency of such activities as dance, poetry and song – religion was not needed because there was no one to mystify, no one to exploit, no one whose conceptual world needed standing on its head.

Mysticism and convoluted theologism emerged only when masculinist institutions began reasserting themselves as the first step in an immensely drawn-out process which was eventually to result in class society and so-called 'civilisation'. Constructs of 'the feminine' became deified only in proportion as real women, in the flesh and blood, were deprived of their power. Goddesses, gods and other miraculous powers could enrich them-

selves only in proportion as ordinary humans were impoverished – robbed of the magic in their own lives. Only in the course of this process was genuine science – or ‘the ancient wisdom’, if you prefer to call it that – progressively subjected to the distorting lenses of sectional interest, partisan special pleading and political ideology masquerading as science.

Only when social life had become irretrievably conflict-ridden was the community-wide *sharing* of understandings no longer possible. At this point, humanity’s basic capital of accumulated knowledge became increasingly fragmented, pulled in opposite directions, fought over and – in part – monopolised by ruling élites. To the extent that shared symbols could be preserved at all, they now meant one thing to one section of society, quite another to the rest. This is the symbolic essence of all secret or esoteric cults.

We have seen how, in the case of the Australian Aboriginal Rainbow Snake motif, male power succeeded in turning what was once the woman-empowering consciousness-of-strength of society as a whole into the gender-specific exclusive power-knowledge of initiated men. The very same ‘All-Mother’, ‘Snake-Woman’ or ‘Dragon’ which, as a collective construct, had crystallised women’s consciousness of their reproductive/menstrual solidarity, now became progressively inverted, to the point at which this blood-empowered monster could be presented as periodically ‘angered’ by the smell of menstruating women. It was now stated that the Rainbow Snake – born (according to the myths) in women’s menstrual solidarity – demanded and insisted upon the marginalisation and isolation of menstruating women. Women now gave birth to male offspring who grew up not only to keep secrets from their own mothers, but through initiation to perpetuate and impose an extraordinary symbolic system in which menstruation and birth were rendered disempowering to women, empowering – in elaborate, male-surrogate symbolic forms – to men.

Within the Marxist political paradigm which I am using here, this may be said to parallel the ultimate paradox at the root of Marx’s *Capital*, when Marx finds that Capital and Labour are ultimately one and the same. The one is the other – when turned against itself. The wealth, power and knowledge of the capitalist class is nothing other than the conscious labour of the working class in alienated, politically inverted form – workers now experiencing their atomisation and oppression at the mercy of what in the final analysis is their own co-operative intelligence, productivity and power.

### The Structure of Scientific Revolutions

On 21 June 1633, Galileo was interrogated by the Pope and by a tribunal of high officials of the Catholic Church who threatened to torture him unless he withdrew his allegation that the earth circled the sun. As is well known, the conflict between the Ptolemaic and Copernican systems of astronomy was then very much a political one. Anyone supporting Copernicus risked

persecution, imprisonment – or even being burnt at the stake.

Darwin more recently was regarded as instigating a theologically dangerous, politically subversive theory in questioning Genesis by arguing that the human anatomy had evolved by natural selection from that of an ancestral ape. In many parts of Christendom to this day, religious fundamentalism has succeeded in keeping the flames of this particular debate very much alive.

Karl Marx, writing in the same age as Darwin, was viewed as presenting a political rather than scientific theory in arguing that human knowledge itself always expresses the material interests of definite social groups, the fundamental variable in this context being economic interest.

In the case of both Galileo and Darwin, it was only the political and ideological defeat of the Church on the issues concerned – defeats which formed part of a wider process of social and political change – which eventually lifted the two thinkers' scientific contributions (at least in most parts of the West) from the realm of political controversy. Such cases illustrate that it is only once its initial political coloration has faded away that science becomes generally recognised for what it is. We might say that science *has to conquer politically before it can shed its political cloak*.

Achievements such as those of Copernicus, Darwin or Einstein are termed 'paradigms' by that most frequently cited of all contemporary science historians, T. S. Kuhn. Paradigms are 'universally recognised scientific achievements that for a time provide model problems and solutions to a community of practitioners' (1970: viii).

Once a natural science paradigm has triumphed in its field, the usual course is for it to validate itself again and again, in ever greater detail, by in effect forbidding scientists to investigate problems other than those for which the paradigm offers a solution. Only problems whose solutions, like those of a crossword puzzle, are already 'built in' by their method of formulation are allowed. 'Other problems', as Kuhn (1970: 37) writes, 'including many that had previously been standard, are rejected as metaphysical, as the concern of another discipline, or sometimes as just too problematic to be worth the time'.

However, it is not for us simply to condemn the rigid, conservative paradigms which major scientific advances eventually produce. Kuhn presents instead a subtle, dialectical argument, showing that it is precisely through such conservatism that new, revolutionary scientific breakthroughs are gradually prepared. Only a rigid, conservative but extremely detailed and precise theoretical structure can be disturbed by some small finding which seems 'wrong'. It is only a community of scientists who confidently expect to find everything 'normal' who will genuinely know what an 'abnormality' or 'novelty' is – and who will be thrown into a state of crisis by it. A more easy going, open-minded community which never expected precise regularities in

the first place would not let themselves be bothered by such things.

Scientific revolutions are classically precipitated by anomalies. A planet is in the wrong part of the sky. A photographic plate is clouded when it should not be. A fundamental law of nature is apparently defied. A piece of laboratory equipment designed and constructed merely to add precision to a familiar finding of normal science behaves in a wholly unexpected way. To normal science, such abnormalities are merely an irritation or a nuisance. In attempts to defend the old paradigm, efforts are made to suppress, obliterate or ignore the bothersome findings or events. New observations are made, new experiments are set up – with the sole intention of eliminating the anomaly concerned. But it is precisely these attempts to defend the old paradigm which now begin to shake it to its foundations. Had the old, rigid, paradigm not had its ardent defenders, the anomaly concerned would probably not even have been noticed. Now, however, an entire community of scientists begins to feel challenged by it, and more and more attention is focused upon it. Attempts are made to explain it away. But the more such attempts are made, the more inconsistent and inadequate the old paradigm appears, the more strange the anomaly seems, and the more dissatisfied a section of the scientific community becomes.

It is the *internal inconsistencies* now apparently permeating the old theoretical structure which convince some scientists – at first only a small number – that something is fundamentally wrong. Copernicus, for example, complained that in his day the astronomers who opposed him were so inconsistent 'that they cannot even explain or observe the constant length of the seasonal year'. In all periods immediately preceding what Kuhn terms a *scientific revolution*, similar complaints are made. There is no neat, logical proof that the old paradigm is wrong. Rather, there arises a general sense of dissatisfaction, a feeling – on the part of some – that *absolutely everything is wrong*, and a gradual splintering of the scientific community into schools and factions between whom communication is difficult or even impossible. Few things – not even the most elementary principles – seem to be agreed upon any more. 'The proliferation of competing articulations', writes Kuhn, 'the willingness to try anything, the expression of explicit discontent, the recourse to philosophy and to debate over fundamentals, all these are symptoms of a transition from normal to extraordinary research' (1970: 91). All these are signs that the old theoretical edifice is crumbling and that a new one is about to take its place.

The transition to a new paradigm is achieved, finally, through revolution. A *scientific revolution*, according to Kuhn, is not simply an addition to pre-existing knowledge. It is, within any given field, 'a reconstruction of the field from new fundamentals' – a complete demolition of an old theoretical and conceptual structure and its replacement by a new one based on entirely different interests, aims and premises (1970: 85). During the course of such a revolution, nothing is agreed, everything seems to be ideological and

political, and issues are decided by 'unconstitutional' means. The old paradigm is not defeated on the basis of its own rules but is attacked from outside. It cannot be defeated on the basis of its own rules for, as we have seen, and as was discussed in this book in particular in Chapter 1, these rules are not only inadequate to solve the new problems which have begun to arise – *they actually preclude any discussion of these problems at all.*

All of the successful 'scientific revolutions' that Kuhn discusses were accomplished within the natural, not the social, sciences. The reasons for this are not far to seek. In the humanities, social pressures have been far more decisive and enduring than in physics, chemistry or related fields. In the humanities, the power expressed within the competing paradigms has been *directly political*. The paradigm change pressed for by Marx in attempting to introduce objectivity into the historical and social sciences was, for this reason, never consummated.

We have no way of knowing what might have happened had Marxism conquered politically in Europe or even the United States in the period 1905–26 when it apparently stood most chance of doing so. But a possibility consistent with Marx's own vision would be that the late twentieth-century international community would long since have ceased to regard his school of thought as 'politics' rather than 'science'. In fact, of course, capitalism survived, the Russian Revolution which Marx indirectly inspired was contained, Stalinist counter-revolution triumphed within the sealed borders of the Soviet Union, the banner of 'scientific socialism' became mythologised, dogmatised and hopelessly compromised – and for nearly seventy years the world became frozen, paralysed within a mould of mutually antagonistic yet reciprocally dependent 'capitalist' and so-called 'communist' power-blocs. In place of Marx's hoped-for age of scientific enlightenment and human self-emancipation there ensued nearly seventy years of at best postponement and at worst crushing defeat: arms race, balance of terror and – at the deepest level – the kind of intellectual paralysis which only fear can induce. Only since Europe's year of revolutions – that 200th anniversary of the fall of the Bastille when the monstrous edifice of Stalinism finally began crumbling to dust – has this situation begun fundamentally to change, creating vast new economic and other problems but at least freeing conscious humanity to experience these as inescapably *global* challenges and, for the first time in almost a century, to *think*.

In the case of anthropology – despite the political obstacles – there has been perhaps more forward movement throughout the twentieth century than elsewhere in the social sciences. This has been partly, no doubt, because 'other cultures' can be viewed with at least some sense of detachment from one's own. In addition, anthropology owes its existence to the vast amount of

often-challenging fieldwork whose accumulating findings have repeatedly prompted novel efforts at interpretation. In effect, anthropological thinkers have been rescued from mental and political oblivion in being subjected to the mental influences of those non-capitalist ordinary people as well as shamanic and other thinkers – many of them scientific geniuses – among whom they have stayed. But without repeating the historical discussion of Chapters 1 and 2, let it be noted simply that in recent decades, with the demise of structuralism and other widely accepted paradigms and the absence of any agreement on alternatives, a sense of impasse, frustration, and widespread dissatisfaction within the discipline has prevailed among social anthropologists for some time.

There has long been no theoretical framework which brings together anthropology's various sub-disciplines – the study of primate behaviour, of human evolution, of archaeology, of pre-capitalist economics, kinship, ritual, mythology and other domains. Nowadays, it is not even believed that there could ever be such a framework. Such paradigms as exist are those of the discipline's fragments; dividing up the field, they validate the permanence of its incommensurable terminologies, its boundaries and its inconsistencies. Each sub-discipline's 'anomalous' findings are for the most part safely ignored – usually by being projected across the nearest disciplinary boundary as someone else's problem.

In fact the 'anomalies' of the science of culture have accumulated since the founding of social anthropology more than a century ago, occasionally finding their way into the centre of a new paradigm (as happened with the marriage rules central to the kinship analyses of Lévi-Strauss) but more often remaining outside the focus of any theoretical framework. When Nadel (1957: 177) wrote that the advance of any science 'is punctuated as much by the disappearance of old problems as by the emergence of new ones', he was particularly thinking of social anthropology. 'The old problems are abandoned', he wrote, not because they are solved but

because all that can be said has been said; and if certain questions still remain unanswered they are yet shelved in spite of it, or perhaps because of it – because one realises that they are unanswerable and should be replaced by other, more profitable, ones.

The problems abandoned have been precisely those which almost all late nineteenth-century thinkers considered most urgent and significant:

Think of the controversies, now silent, about the origin of totemism, the distinction of magic and science, the 'meaning' (or 'nature' or 'function') of taboo or sacrifice, and many other, similar topics. These were brave attempts, aiming at final explanations, even though they contained much that was speculative, much that was over-simplified, and a great deal of purely verbal argumentation. Today, we have grown much more modest. . . . And many of the questions which inspired the earlier scholars

are simply no longer asked. Perhaps we shall return to them one day.  
(Nadel 1957: 189)

Nearly a generation later, Robert Murphy (1972: 37) was to comment: 'We do not just fail to return to the basic questions – we have forgotten what they are.'

This book has set out from the observation that despite decades of attempted explanation, almost everything about traditional human cultures is 'anomalous'. Firstly, the findings of social anthropology are anomalous in a general way in relation to the biological paradigms – Darwinian, neo-Darwinian, sociobiological – which set the parameters for most discussions on human evolution and cultural origins. Secondly, they are anomalous in more specific contexts in relation to what is left of the prevailing paradigms of social anthropology as a discipline.

The dogma of the cultural centrality of 'the family' has been the main generator of such anomalies, burdening western social anthropology from the 1920s onwards. Malinowski (1956: 72, 28) reiterated tirelessly and indeed tiresomely that 'the tradition of individual marriage and the family has its roots in the deepest needs of human nature and of social order', seeing it as his professional task to 'prove to the best of my ability that marriage and the family have been, are, and will remain the foundations of human society'. Whereas, Malinowski noted, W. H. R. Rivers 'would lead us to believe that what I like to call the *initial situation* of kinship is not individual but communal' (1930: 99), his own view was the opposite. The family and marriage, he insisted, 'from the beginning were individual' (1956: 76). Culture's 'initial situation' was dominated by

the group consisting of father and mother and their children, forming a joint household, co-operating economically, legally united by a contract and surrounded by religious sanctions which make the family into a moral unit. (1956: 80)

Lest anyone imagine that this was a dispassionate 'scientific' rather than thoroughly *politically motivated* judgement, let me quote Malinowski one more time. Here are the words in which he denounced what he termed the 'group motherhood' theory which until recently had been part of the dominant anthropological paradigm:

I believe that the most disruptive element in the modern revolutionary tendencies is the idea that parenthood can be made collective. If once we came to the point of doing away with the individual family as the pivotal element of our society, we should be faced with a social catastrophe compared with which the political upheavals of the French revolution and the economic changes of Bolshevism are insignificant. The question,

therefore, as to whether group motherhood is an institution which ever existed, whether it is an arrangement which is compatible with human nature and social order, is of considerable practical interest. (Malinowski 1956: 76)

It was in the light of these considerations that Malinowski (1930: 97) came to declare that 'classificatory terminologies do not exist and never could have existed', whilst what he termed the ideas of 'a whole school of anthropologists from Bachofen on' were branded not only wrong but 'positively dangerous' (1956: 76). The family and its kinship terminologies had always been 'individual'. The nuclear, monogamous, family was initially the cellular unit of culture. It has been this politically motivated conception of an 'initial situation' – the reverse of that suggested in this book – which has kept social anthropological kinship theory in a state of crisis for most of the twentieth century.

'I believe', wrote Sir Edmund Leach (1961a: 26) thirty years ago, 'that we social anthropologists are like the mediaeval Ptolemaic astronomers; we spend our time trying to fit the facts of the objective world into the framework of a set of concepts which have been developed *a priori* instead of from observation'. Leach was one of the few to have realised that by far the most damaging of these arbitrarily imposed concepts was the notion of 'the elementary family' as 'a universal institution'. Anthropologists since Malinowski on, he wrote, have insisted that 'the family' in the English-language sense of this word is the logical, necessary and inevitable focal point around which all human kinship systems revolve and from the standpoint of which they must be viewed. Leach observed that the characteristic kinship systems of traditional cultures for the most part become unintelligible when viewed from this standpoint. As a result, he concluded, the mental constructs of modern kinship theory are beginning to look as bewildering and futile as the cycles and epicycles of those Ptolemaic astronomers who could conceptualise the universe only by assuming the centrality of our own Earth.

Some years later, in an evaluation of the contemporary state of kinship theory, Needham (1974: 39) expressed a similar verdict. 'The current theoretical position', he observed, 'is obscure and confused, and there is little clear indication of what future developments we can expect or should encourage.' He concluded, in tones indicating a mood close to despair:

In view of the constant professional attention extending over roughly a century, and a general improvement in ethnographic accounts, this is a remarkably unsatisfactory situation in what is supposed to be a basic discipline. Obviously, after so long a time, and so much field research, it is not just facts that we need. Something more fundamental seems to have gone wrong. What we have to look for, perhaps, is some radical flaw in

analysis, some initial defect in the way we approach the phenomena.

Matters have scarcely improved in the years since Leach and Needham wrote.

### The Revolution

In this book I have set about *inverting* rather than simply modifying most previous assumptions relating 'norm' to 'anomaly' in human kinship and culture. Whereas most previously prevailing paradigms have regarded 'pair-bonding' or the 'nuclear family' as normative in some basic sense for human culture as a whole, I have set out with a model in which 'the family' is split down the middle. Culture starts with solidarity. This takes the specific form of *gender solidarity* – in effect, women's periodic construction of a sexual 'picket line'. Not only culture but scientific self-awareness is born on this picket line. It is here that 'the Dragon' first flexes her limbs.

Where primary commitments and loyalties are concerned, culture in the first instance places marital partners in opposite camps. Clan organisation, unilineal descent, exogamy, in-law avoidances, rules preventing couples from dancing together, sharing in sacred ceremonial or sharing public meals – these and related features of traditional cultures (see Chapter 9) are expressions of such a norm. From this point of view, menstrual avoidances appear 'normal'. It is the norm for husband and wife to be set apart. Menstrual avoidances periodically help re-establish this norm. Where the contrary obtains – where nuclear family bonding is so strong that husband and wife remain together even during menstruation – this is a deviation from the norm.

In this way, instead of setting out from numerous ideas, I have in this book taken as my point of departure only one – namely, that in order to transcend primate dominance and induce hunters to provide consistent help, evolving human females had to rely on the weapon of the collective strike. Their periodic sexual withdrawal brought women together and had the effect of splitting the nuclear family. I have shown how rules of incest and exogamy, unilineal descent, the existence of moieties and clans, menstrual avoidances and the recurrent formal structures of traditional ritual and myth can be understood as logical consequences and expressions of that starting point alone.

Yet it is necessary to emphasise that the theory presented here – with its stress on 'group parenthood', on matrilineal priority and on the concept of revolution – is not intended as a new paradigm for the anthropological or social sciences. Although some of its logical consequences may seem novel, my model is in fact an orthodox one with respect to the Marxist tradition

within anthropology. Let me conclude this book by recalling what this tradition was.

Engels (1972 [1884]: 49) held that in the evolution of the primates, collective bands – ('hordes') on the one hand, 'harem'-type polygamous 'families' on the other – were not complementary 'but antagonistic to each other'. There was a fundamental contradiction between these two *levels* of social and sexual organisation. Systems of primate dominance, according to Engels, have 'a certain value in drawing conclusions regarding human societies – but only in a negative sense'. There are no obvious evolutionary continuities. Where groups of primate females are bound closely to males, in each case 'only one adult male, one husband is permissible'. This individualism is in direct contrast with the incipient primate 'horde', whose full development becomes possible only once the fragmenting influence of male dominance and jealousy is overcome with the transition to humanity.

The system of individualistic male sexual dominance, according to Engels, led to continual sexual conflicts:

Mutual toleration among the adult males, freedom from jealousy, was, however, the first condition for the building of those large and enduring groups in the midst of which alone the transition from animal to man could be achieved. And indeed, what do we find as the oldest, most primitive form of the family, of which undeniable evidence can be found in history, and which even today can be studied here and there? Group marriage, the form in which whole groups of men and whole groups of women belong to one another, and which leaves but little scope for jealousy. (Engels 1972 [1884]: 49–50)

Contrary to what is sometimes supposed, Engels did not have a gradualistic conception of human origins in which continuities between ape and human social forms were stressed. Had he had such a conception, he would not have been able to insist that 'the animal family and primitive human society are incompatible things . . .' (1972 [1884]: 49). Extraordinarily in view of the limitations of his sources, and setting his head and shoulders above his contemporaries, Engels' position has survived the test of time. His paradigm has not had to be overturned or transcended in the writing of the present work, although naturally it has been necessary to correct many details and elaborate and document his model on the basis of what we know about primates and human cultures today.

But the relevance of the writings of Marx and Engels is greater than this. In the passages cited, Engels was assuming an important parallel – pregnant with implications on many levels – between the two great revolutions experienced by the human species on what he saw as its journey towards communism. In each case – in the birth of the human species as in its socialist rebirth – the revolution is an emancipation of the 'living instruments of production'. These 'instruments' – women as child-bearers on the

one hand, workers as wealth-producers on the other – are human beings who, *because* of their instrumental status, are to that extent denied their full humanity. The materially productive *sex*, according to Engels, achieved its emancipation through the overthrow of male dominance and will do so again; the materially productive *class* will simultaneously achieve its emancipation through the overthrow of Capital. In each case, individualistic and competitive ownership of the instruments of production is or will be replaced by social self-ownership, which transforms the meaning of 'ownership' itself. Within the same paradigm, the socialist revolution, no less than the first human revolution, is a process in which 'for the first time man, in a certain sense, is finally marked off from the rest of the animal kingdom, and emerges from mere animal conditions of existence into really human ones' (Engels 1962 [1887]: 153). The first revolution established communism in its 'primitive' or simple form. The communism of the future will constitute, in the words of Morgan (1877: 552) adopted by Engels (1972 [1884] 166), 'a revival, in a higher form, of the liberty, equality and fraternity of the ancient gentes', in other words, a revival of the kinship solidarity of the matrilineal clan. The future revolution itself is, within this paradigm, a dialectical repetition of the birth process of the human race.

The parallels involved here can be extended indefinitely, and in fact – provided 'the revolution' in its contemporary sense proves more than a mythic construct – would amount to living proof of the theory of origins proposed here. In order to understand the origins of culture, no paradigm shift is required. Although much information-gathering and *learning* is certainly required, it is not necessary to add anything to the *conceptual* model already provided by Marx. The revolutions at both ends of history are in abstract, structural terms the same. It therefore suffices to know how to switch or modulate Marx's conceptual model accurately between the two levels – between the plane of nature and that of culture, the plane of *reproduction* and that of *production proper*, the plane of sex and that of class.

It was crucial to Marx's position that labour *is* procreation – but raised to a different level, and being definable on either level as 'species-life' or 'life producing life' (Marx 1971a [1844]: 139). The labour process is to culture what procreation is to nature. It was crucial to his position that class *is* sex on a higher plane, class oppression actually *beginning* as sexual oppression pure and simple:

the unequal distribution (both quantitative and qualitative), of labour and its products, hence property: the nucleus, the first form, of which lies in the family, where wife and children are the slaves of the husband. (Marx and Engels 1947 [1846]: 21)

The appearance of exploited classes has taken place in a process whereby oppressed but materially productive males have been treated as 'women' by dominant males, incorporated *within* the category of the 'family' or the

'harem' (see Marx's ethnological notebooks: Krader 1972: 333, 340) in order to be exploited in structurally the same way that patriarchal family heads can exploit their one or several wives. That this process was ultimately connected with the transition from hunting to agriculture was obvious to Marx:

The modern family contains in embryo not only slavery (*servitus*) but serfdom also, since from the very beginning it is connected with agricultural services. It contains within itself in *miniature* all the antagonisms which later develop on a wide scale within society and its state. (Quoted by Engels (1972 [1884]: 68)

The new system 'makes species-life into a means of individual life' (Marx 1963c [1844]: 127). A married woman, now, must engage in sexual activity – 'species-life' in its natural form – in order to be allowed the things necessary for her physical existence, just as a hired hand must express the human essence through labour, but *only because otherwise there will be no wage-packet*. In this context, '*life activity, productive life*, now appears to man only as *means* for the satisfaction of a need, the need to maintain physical existence' (Marx 1963c [1844]: 127). The manner of exploitation is therefore a form of prostitution, and it is *this* which makes it possible for Marx to insist that 'Prostitution is only a *specific* form of the *universal* prostitution of the worker . . .' (Marx 1963c [1844]: 156n).

The topic of prostitution was discussed in this book at some length in Chapter 5. A system compelling meat-hungry evolving human females to compete in emitting sexual 'yes' signals was there contrasted with a structure allowing them to gain meat by taking the opposite tack and signalling a collective 'no'. The first system tied each performance of the sexual act directly with the struggle for status, privileges or food; the second allowed sex to be postponed and to occur only in its own space, once the hunt had proved successful and anxieties about food had been dispelled. Some loose threads remaining from that discussion can now be tied up.

Prostitution was treated in almost wholly negative terms in our discussion in Chapter 5. Yet among primates it is perfectly natural for sex to be used as a bargaining counter in the search for status, meat or other food. This is a type of sexual activity whose evolutionary *value* is that it involves, as Zuckerman (1932: 232) was among the first to point out, 'the liberation of sexual responses from the function of reproduction'. When sex is used not just reproductively but politically – as a way of negotiating one's way through a conflict-ridden political landscape, or as a way of acquiring privileges or food – then this results in selection pressures placing sex increasingly under cortical rather than hormonal control. Sahlins (1960: 80) comments:

The evolution of the physiology of sex itself provided a basis for the cultural reorganization of social life. . . . [A] progressive emancipation of

sexuality from hormonal control runs through the primate order. This trend culminates in mankind, among whom sex is controlled more by the intellect – the cerebral cortex – than by glands. Thus it becomes possible to regulate sex by moral rules; to subordinate it to higher, collective ends.

The paradox would be sharp – that the basis for human morality was prepared by prostitution. Yet it would be no more of a paradox than that appreciated by Marx in describing capitalism itself as nothing but the prostitution of labour, a prostitution which divorced labour from its simple, original function – the production of use-values for the reproduction of the community of labourers themselves – whilst subjecting it to quite other forces and purposes operating on an international scale.

It is only when we fail to see it in its dialectical, evolutionary, context that 'prostitution' appears simply as 'prostitution'. In its historical context, as Marx (1971b [1859]: 71) writes, 'universal prostitution appears as a necessary phase in the development of the social character of personal talents, abilities, capacities and activities'. By being prostituted in the service of Capital, labour becomes enormously developed, socialised and – more and more – subjected to global forms of control. This divorce of labour from its attachment to purely local, limited needs and controls is a precondition which has to be met if, eventually, the productive life of humanity is to be brought under our own conscious control in our own interests and those of our planet.

Capitalism, as the most developed system of universal labour prostitution there has ever been, is within this paradigm only a dialectical 'return', on a higher plane, to the competitive sexual systems and forms of dominance of pre-cultural humans and of the higher primates. It is this which *makes* the future revolution the same as the human one: in both epochs, in modern times as in the palaeolithic, the struggle for humanity is directed against *the same kind of thing*.

The most basic teaching of dialectical materialism is that evolutionary time is not linear but curved, like Einstein's space, and that its curves form spiral-like patterns, each return to the point of origin being in fact not a simple return but a 'return on a higher plane'. The period of immense global instability we are going through today – a planet-wide revolution whose immediate precipitating factor was the collapse of Eastern European Stalinism – is not entirely new to us, although it may at first sight appear to be so. The ends of time are being joined together. We have been here – at this point on the spiral – before. The revolution's outcome is not simply in 'the future' conceived as something abstracted from the past. As we fight to become free, it is as if we were becoming *human* for the first time in our lives. But in this sense, because it concerns *becoming human*, the birth process we have got to win – our survival as a species depends on it – has in the deepest sense been won already. None of us would be here had it not been. To understand this

may be to understand, and thereby to make ourselves the instruments of, the real strength of our cause and the inevitability of our emancipation as women, as workers and as a species. The working class is the first materially productive class in the history of class society to have acquired the power of the strike. It is the first such class to have acquired the power to say 'no'. When it understands the identity between this 'no' and the 'no' which women have been trying to say for the past several thousand years – a fusion of forces will take place to generate a power which no force on earth will be able to stop.